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BROADWAY of AMERICA

100 years along the Bankhead Highway

by **DAN L. SMITH**

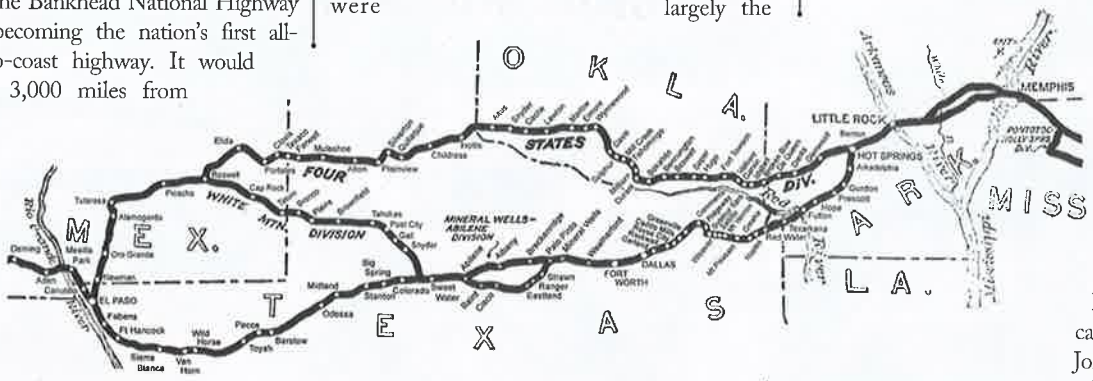
TODAY IN TEXAS, travelers can drive more than 79,000 miles of farm-to-market, ranch-to-market, state, U.S. and interstate highways. Only a century ago, however, not a single highway existed in the Lone Star State, and Texas had no highway department — until in 1916, a landmark bit of federal legislation came together with a promoter's dream, and a new route made history.

That year the Bankhead National Highway was launched, becoming the nation's first all-weather coast-to-coast highway. It would stretch roughly 3,000 miles from Washington, D.C., to San Diego, California, with nearly a third of its length in Texas. Hewing to a southerly route, skirting the western mountains and largely free from ice and snow, it could be used reliably year-round. While the Lincoln Highway to the north predated the Bankhead by a few years and is fairly regarded as the first transcontinental highway, it was practically impassable during the winter.

ROOTS IN ALABAMA: BANKHEAD AND ROUNTREE

THE BANKHEAD was named in honor of Alabama Senator John Hollis Bankhead, a driving force behind the Federal Highway Act of 1916, also called the Bankhead Bill, which for the first time provided federal aid to states for highway construction. Roads at the time were largely the responsibility of local communities or counties. Existing roads were largely dirt and unusable in wet weather; construction was poor and maintenance even worse. For years prior to Bankhead's bill, members of Good Roads Associations nationwide lobbied for better roads in America.

Sen. Bankhead understood that federal aid was no less important for adequate roads than for rivers and harbors, dams and other major civil engineering projects. In addition, although America had not yet joined in the European War in 1916, it was increasingly obvious from the ongoing conflict that better roads were essential to America's military preparedness and defense. (The same impetus would later propel creation of the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s, following World War II.)



ON THE MAP: The only map known to have been produced by Asa Rountree and the Bankhead Highway Association, published in a 1922 road guide and reprinted in newspapers nationwide, shows the middle third of the route crossing Texas.

COURTESY DAN L. SMITH

In 1913, the same year the Lincoln Highway came into existence, John Asa Rountree of Birmingham, Alabama, formed the United States Good Roads Association. He convinced fellow Alabamian John Bankhead to assume the role of president

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION; BARBARA BRANNON / TEXAS PLAINS TRAIL; BARBARA BRANNON / TEXAS PLAINS TRAIL; TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

LIVING HISTORY: (clockwise from top left) Ranch style motel, 807 E. Broadway St., Van Horn, 1958; Hi Ho Ballroom, 2315 W. Jefferson St., Grand Prairie, 1959; in Spring 2016, the Sisters on the Fly women's outdoor enthusiasts group "waltzed across Texas" from El Paso to Texarkana along the Bankhead Highway. Car clubs, motorcycle groups, motor coaches and even cyclists are finding the historic route appealing for leisure trips; Art Deco restaurant, 123 E. Jefferson Blvd., Dallas, 1938.

of the association, which served the senator's political purposes and at the same time enhanced the visibility and stature of Rountree's organization. The U.S. Good Roads Association quickly became the largest such association in the South, with members nationwide. Thousands attended their annual conventions.

Asa Rountree and Senator Bankhead were of like minds regarding the importance of better roads in the South, with its economy still struggling even decades after impacts of the Civil War and Reconstruction. A former newspaperman, now editor, publisher, salesman and pitchman, Rountree was tireless in his support of Bankhead's efforts toward federal assistance to the states, but he also had his own dream — a first-class Southern highway. The Bankhead Bill was just what Rountree was waiting for. Shortly after President Wilson enthusiastically signed the bill on July 11, 1916, officials of the U. S. Good Roads Association agreed that no more fitting tribute could be paid to the man already known as "The Father of Good Roads" than to name the proposed Southern Highway after John H. Bankhead. The Bankhead National Highway Association was incorporated, with its headquarters in Birmingham, on October 6, 1916. Asa Rountree was the executive secretary; former Alabama Congressman (and close friend of Sen. Bankhead) Thomas Plowman was named president.

THE VINTAGE DINER: Situated along the Bankhead Highway in Weatherford, the Vintage Grill & Car Museum serves as eatery, live music venue and classic car showroom. Weatherford will host its Bankhead Highway Centennial celebration Sat., Sept. 24, as part of its annual Stray Days festival.

THE BANKHEAD IN TEXAS

TEXAS ALSO responded quickly to the Bankhead Bill. As a result of the 1916 legislation, Texas signed a bill in early 1917 establishing a state highway department — the last of the 48 states to do so. (The federal bill required a state highway department to participate in the cost-sharing of federal and state funds.) Moreover, as a result of its size, Texas was positioned to benefit as no other state when it came to federal funding, which was apportioned according to mileage of highways to be built. Texas was slated to receive the lion's share of federal funds.

Curtis Hancock of Dallas was appointed the first chairman of the Texas Highway Commission, and he and other state road officials lost no time in mapping where primary highways would be built. After coordinating with county officials, the commission published the first Texas Highway Map in 1918. Unlike later state road maps, of course, the first map showed primarily where the roads would be, not where they already existed, at least as anything other than dirt trails. The first map showed a network of 25 number highways, with the numbers more or less indicating a priority. Texas Highway No. 1 was designated to stretch the width of the state, from El Paso to Texarkana. Significantly, the highway commission also announced in 1918 that Texas 1 would be the Bankhead Highway in Texas.

PATHFINDERS AND PROMOTERS

MEANWHILE, the cross-country route of the Bankhead Highway was being established in segments, after pathfinding teams, always led by Rountree himself, explored and investigated possible routes. They evaluated the condition of existing roads; consulted with local, county and state officials about plans for road building; evaluated the level of local and state enthusiasm, support and funding; and otherwise sought out what would be the best possible alignment for the highway. Miles of road, primarily dirt, already existed, but many more miles were yet to be constructed. The Bankhead Association also established standards for their road, similar to requirements of the government's Bureau of Public Roads for cost-sharing under the federal aid act. There was no shortage of potential routes, as it seemed every town offered inducements to be on a national highway. (There were many other named highway associations, all jostling for support of routes of their own.)

Rountree's U.S. Good Roads Association and Bankhead Highway Association met jointly in conventions each April. High on the agenda was receiving and approving the report of the pathfinders. In 1917, the route was decided between Washington, D.C. and Atlanta; in 1918, from Atlanta to Memphis; in 1919, the route across Texas to El Paso; and in 1920, the final section on to San Diego.

The 1919 convention was held in Mineral Wells, Texas. As many as two thousand enthusiastic delegates attended the often rowdy week-long meetings. Stakes were high: the route to be determined was the middle third of the national highway. Texas delegates dominated the convention, but a significant number of delegates were there from Oklahoma and New Mexico, and they lobbied for a route from Arkansas, across southern Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle, then through New Mexico to El Paso (what later was called the "Four-States" route).

THE "ALL-TEXAS" ROUTE AND BRANCHES

NOW RECALL that in 1917, Texas officials had announced that Texas 1 would be the Bankhead route in Texas. Asa Rountree by then had become a frequent and familiar visitor to Texas. Prior to the 1919 convention he and the pathfinders dutifully explored both the Texas and proposed Oklahoma routes, but the deal was no doubt done by then. The hopes of Oklahoma's outnumbered contingent at the convention were likely doomed from the start. The "All-Texas" route was chosen for the Bankhead Highway.

The Oklahoma delegation did not hide their disappointment at Mineral Wells, but they took some consolation a year later when their route, called the Four-States Division, was designated a branch of the primary Bankhead Highway align-

BARBARA BRANNON / TEXAS PLAINS TRAIL

ment. Nonetheless, nothing seems ever to have come of that route, other than being noted on a few maps.

There were other branches in Texas as well. A "White Mountains" branch from Roscoe through Snyder and Plains into New Mexico was designated, providing an alternate route to Carlsbad Caverns. Another branch was mapped that diverted from the primary Bankhead route at Mount Pleasant in East Texas, joining the Meridian Highway at Waco and extending to Laredo. It was designated the "Texas-Mexico Division" of the Bankhead National Highway. There would be roads along those routes, but unlike the primary Bankhead route, the "Four States" and several other designated branches seem to have quickly faded from memory.

PAVING THE WAY

THE ROUTE of the primary Bankhead Highway route across Texas was finalized after the April 1919 convention in Mineral Wells, but it remained to turn that route into a paved highway, and that took several years. By the end of 1930, all but 20 percent (about 180 miles) of the Bankhead in Texas had been paved with brick, macadam, asphalt, or concrete. The Bankhead Highway Association itself turned no dirt, laid no bricks, poured no concrete. Neither did any of the other named highway associations around the country. Instead, they sold the idea of good roads. In the process they furthered the goals of the Good Roads Associations and facilitated the fund raising necessary to allow state highway departments and the Bureau of Public Roads to finance the construction of a highway network in America second to none.

The "Roaring '20s" may have had its flappers and jazz, but much of the noise was from road construction. It was the automobile age, complete with new industries such as service stations, tourist camps — which soon became courts and later motels — and such other businesses as roadside produce stands. Those who argued that better roads meant better economics were soon vindicated as the auto travel boom brought prosperity.

By 1926, there were so many named highways, with overlapping and intersecting routes, along with numbered state highways, that signage became impossibly confusing. The Bureau of Public Roads, in coordination with the states, established a system of numbered federally financed highways, banning the named highways to memory. From Dallas to El Paso, then on to San Diego, what had been Texas 1 — the Bankhead Highway — became part of the US 80 alignment from Savannah, Georgia, westward. From Dallas to Texarkana, the Texas 1/ Bankhead route was absorbed into US 67.

NAMES TO NUMBERS

THE ROMANCE of roads was well established, however, and names persisted long after 1926. New designations appeared as well. Perhaps in competition with "Route 66" from Chicago to California, known colloquially as "The Mother Road," enthusiasts and town fathers in El Paso rallied a convention in Memphis in 1928, and there they succeeded in branding the Bankhead Highway from San Diego to Memphis as part of the "Broadway of America." The "Broadway" continued eastward across Tennessee to New York City. A few Texas cities (Sweetwater, Roscoe and Colorado City, for example) renamed their Main Streets "Broadway."

Alignments have changed over the years, but today Interstates I-30, I-20, and I-10 follow the route of the original Bankhead Highway across Texas through cities such as Texarkana, Mount Vernon, Dallas, Fort Worth, Weatherford, Abilene, Big Spring, Midland, Van Horn and El Paso. But most of the earliest Bankhead Highway in Texas remains as state and county roads that still connect towns the interstates bypass. Some miles lie under the service roads of the interstates, and more are visible as long-abandoned pavement winding across private ranchland. Roadside bridges and culverts dating to the 1920s, and beautiful brick streets that were paved in the early 1920s, can also be found along the way.

Vestiges of tourist camps, motor courts, service stations, eateries, elegant hotels and resorts (and a speakeasy or two!) remain to capture the imagination. Some institutions, like the Hotel Settles in Big Spring and the Hotel El Capitan in Van Horn, have already been restored to their original glory and welcome travelers. Other projects, such as restoration of the famous Baker Hotel in Mineral Wells, are promising. New safety rest areas along I-20 at Thurber (Ranger) Hill celebrate the Bankhead heritage, even preserving part of the old road. Parker County preserves the longest still-named stretch of the Bankhead in Texas. And in Rowlett, a Bankhead Brewing Company is even in the works. The Bankhead name lives on in public memory, aided by some stretches of road that still carry the original name. For heritage travelers, this legacy endures and entices, a century later.

For more, read Dan L. Smith's The Bankhead Highway in Texas *(2013), which includes an illustrated history of the Good Roads Movement, Asa Rountree and the Bankhead Highway Association, routing of the highway, and the 2nd U.S. Army Transcontinental Motor Convoy that crossed the country on the Bankhead Highway in 1920. The book also provides a detailed driving guide to allow the reader to follow the earliest mapped (1921) Bankhead route across Texas.*

Explore the Texas Historical Commission's website at www.thc.texas.gov/bankhead, where you can also download the Bankhead Highway Mobile App Tour covering 850 miles of historic highway from Texarkana to El Paso.