

HISTORY OF THE BANKHEAD HIGHWAY

PRESENTED IN THE CONTEXT OF EXPERIENCE OF GARLAND, TEXAS, A CITY ON ITS ROUTE

The Good Roads Movement

The American obsession with the automobile began shortly before the turn of the 20th century and mushroomed at an astounding rate thereafter. The first auto excursion in Texas is widely believed to have been that run in October 1899 by Edward H. R. Green and George P. Dorris over a rutted dirt road between Terrell and Dallas.¹

The rate at which the obsession grew is suggested by the fact that by 1902 auto races were a featured attraction of the State Fair of Texas. In 1903 the first coast-to-coast auto excursion was run between San Francisco and New York City. In 1905 the Ford Motor Company produced 1,599 autos; two years later it built 14,887.² And Garland, Texas, was as much a victim of the auto fascination as any other population in America. In 1910 the first ad for an automobile manufacturer—the Nelson Motor Car Company, of Chicago—appeared in the *Garland News*.³ In April 1911 the *News* reported that “Garland was filled with visiting autos Sunday.”⁴ And in August of that same year the paper named at least 21 Garland men who were proud owners of new automobiles.⁵

Unfortunately America’s roads were ill-prepared to accommodate the automobile. Most were rutted wagon trails at best, alternately muddy or dusty. Even before the advent of the automobile, bicycle enthusiasts as early as the 1880s had begun to campaign for road improvement. By the turn of the 20th century, however, automobile clubs began taking the lead in the so-called Good Roads Movement. Eventually state and local entities grew increasingly supportive of the improvement of rural roads in an effort to boost rural economies and to help stem the migration of the farm population to the cities.

In 1911 and 1912 the Texas legislature voted some \$5 million in bonds for rural road improvement. Early in 1913 the state legislature passed a bill providing for counties and cities to issue their own road bonds.⁶ Soon thereafter Texas governor O. B. Colquitt proclaimed

November 5 and 6, 1913, to be “Good Roads Days,” acknowledging that the Good Roads Movement promised great progress for the state. Local authorities across the state complained, however, that short of the proclamation the state was not coming forth with much help in building better roads.⁷ And not everyone thought that a program of road improvement was a good idea, a vocal group of farmers insisting that it would primarily benefit the “automobilists” and bring about increases in property taxes and farm rents.

The Good Roads Movement was, however, increasingly successful in gaining support. Groups were organized to lobby lawmakers and local leaders, holding road conventions and disseminating published materials on the economic benefits of better roads. In 1913 the first coast-to-coast improved route, the Lincoln Highway, was pieced together by a Good Roads organization successfully convincing counties and cities to improve linked existing routes with their jurisdictions. Because the cooperation of these independent authorities was in most cases purely voluntary and their funding inconsistent, the quality of the improvements and maintenance could be piecemeal and undependable.

By the year the Lincoln Highway was opened, Garland, Texas, could boast 2 auto sales agencies and an auto repair service. And evidence of the influence of the Good Roads Movement was manifesting itself throughout Dallas County. The route of the gravel-paved Dallas-Greenville “pike,” later to be a segment of the Bankhead Highway, was relocated by the county from its original course just north of the Garland Square to pass through the Square. The *Garland News* at the time celebrated the change, referring to the “pike” as an “interstate route,” presumably a rather new concept.⁸ In October 1913 the Dallas County Highway Improvement Association was organized, led by the Dallas Chamber of Commerce and the Dallas Automobile Club. The local paper said that volunteer work crews would be organized in every county town and autos would be volunteered to transport the crews to the work sites.⁹

By 1914 the impact of the improved and relocated “pike” and the increasing role of the automobile were becoming evident in Garland. A large public well was dug on the Square and landscaped with grass and trees, and new ordinances were passed by the city council to regulate the operation of motor vehicles. In 1915 the local paper recorded the first motor delivery truck

in town¹⁰ and a few months later the town's only chemical fire wagon was remounted on a Ford auto chassis.¹¹ Soon the editor of the paper was calling for the municipal speed limit to be lowered from 18 m.p.h. to a much more reasonable 12 m.p.h.¹² By 1916 Garland was home to 2 auto repair garages, 4 auto sales agencies, 1 auto accessory store, 1 auto paint shop, and 2 motor jitney lines.

Developing the Bankhead Highway

In 1916 the federal government passed the Federal Aid Road Act, which supplied matching funds to the states for upgrading roads, especially those used as postal routes. The plan was authored by Logan Waller Page, director of the Office of Public Roads,¹³ and was sponsored in the U.S. Senate by John Hollis Bankhead, of Alabama. On 6 October 1916 the Bankhead Highway Association was formed in Birmingham, the route being named for Senator Bankhead, who came to be known as the "father of good roads in the U. S. Senate."¹⁴

The Bankhead Highway started at the so-called Zero Milestone, a monument erected near the White House in Washington, D.C., and ended in San Diego, California. Other major cities on its main route included Richmond, Virginia; Durham and Greensboro, North Carolina; Greenville, South Carolina; Athens, Decatur and Atlanta, Georgia; Birmingham, Alabama; Tupelo, Mississippi; Memphis, Tennessee; Little Rock and Hot Springs, Arkansas; Texarkana, Dallas, Ft. Worth, Midland, Odessa, and El Paso, Texas; Las Cruces, New Mexico; Tucson, Tempe, and Phoenix, Arizona; and El Centro, California. This southern route for the nation's second transcontinental highway was viewed as having the advantages of being passable year-round and lying on a low grade without steep mountain climbs.

An item in the *Garland News* of 15 June 1917 suggests that Good Roads committees had already made considerable progress on an improved east-west route through the area. A brief mention on that date stated, "The 'Sociability Run' on the now well-connected highway from Texarkana to El Paso via Dallas and Ft. Worth should arrive at Garland about 5:30 p.m. Tuesday and stop here 30 minutes."¹⁵ One week later the paper reported, "Jerry W. Debenport, vice-president and general manager of the Texarkana-Dallas Highway, and a party of 12 automobiles

filled with Good Roads enthusiasts passed through Garland. They proceeded to Mineral Wells, where a Good Roads Convention is being held. The State Highway Commission is taking part in the convention.”¹⁶ Then a month or so later the editor announced that officials of the Texarkana-Dallas Highway were to pay another visit, and he editorialized, “This highway when fully connected and completed will be a good thing for the towns on its route. It will carry many hundreds of interstate auto travelers. It will mean some increase in certain lines of business And it means a fine opportunity to advertise our town, to show it to strangers as a good place to come, to invest, and to grow up with Texas.”¹⁷

The improved route referred to here became Texas State Highway 1, a designation assigned in 1917 as one of the original 26 state highways. Texas Highway 1 was to become part of the Bankhead Highway in 1920.¹⁸

A timeline of steps in the development of the Bankhead Highway in Texas, especially through the Garland, Texas, area follows:

Fall, 1917. The Bankhead Highway “pathfinders” established the first leg of the road from Washington to Memphis.¹⁹

25 Oct 1918. “Scouts for the route of the Bankhead Highway will be here [Garland] November 6. This is probably the most important highway to be built in the South and will in all likelihood be designated a military road.”—*Garland News*. [This is the first instance of the use of the name “Bankhead Highway” in the local newspaper.]

Apr 1919. The second leg of the highway, Memphis to El Paso, was established this month.²⁰ Thus all of Texas State Highway 1 (Texarkana to El Paso) was incorporated into the Bankhead route.

11 Apr 1919. “Arthur P. Dyer, secretary of the Texas Bankhead Highway, addressed a meeting of Garland citizens Monday. He explained the importance of the

highway as one of two year-round transcontinental routes. Twenty-one senators live on the highway route, which insures federal support. Dyer said Garland was the only town on the Texas route which had voluntarily organized and gone to work without asking for outside help and complimented the town's live spirit."—*Garland News*.

16 Jan 1920. "A desperate attempt is being made by Oklahoma to get the Bankhead Highway."—*Garland News*. [This matter was settled somewhat later by the decision to keep the main route in Texas and a branch route through Oklahoma.]

Apr 1920. The final leg of the Bankhead Highway was established between El Paso and San Diego.²¹

Jul 1920. The Dallas division of the Bankhead Highway Association was organized in a meeting at the Oriental Hotel.²²

20 Jul 1920. The War Department is proposing a "detour" route for military travel between Texarkana and Dallas by way of Paris, Sherman and McKinney. It would bypass the main route planned for the Bankhead Highway, "the greatest highway in the U.S."—*Garland News*

In late 1920 and early 1921, as the Bankhead Highway approached completion, Dallas County labored over finalizing the highway's route from Garland to Dallas. A new alignment of the Dallas-Garland road was chosen to parallel the SFRR between Reinhardt and present Miller Road, supplanting the old route of the "pike" over present Jupiter Road and Forest Lane. Then a major flap arose when it was proposed by the county to run the Bankhead through Garland along the route of present Avenue D, completely missing the Square by several blocks.²³ Outcry from the downtown businessmen succeeded in returning the route to that portion of the "pike" (at that time Texas State 1, now Main Street) running through the Square.

The Bankhead Highway Fulfills Economic Expectations

Not surprisingly, the belief of the Garland News editor that the Bankhead Highway promised “fine opportunities” for Garland and other towns on its route proved to be accurate. The automobile had been the primary stimulus for the development of highways such as the Bankhead, but the improved highways in turn stimulated the evolution of motor transportation. The impact on auto traffic was almost immediate. For 19 hours one Sunday in June 1923 the Garland Chamber of Commerce counted autos passing through the Square on the Bankhead Highway. They counted 2,585 and estimated that 75% of them stopped for service, drinks, and food.²⁴ Later that summer the paper declared: “People are moving to Garland so fast lately that what few gossips we have are being worked overtime to circulate their peculiarities and shortcomings.” In the same issue the paper noted that the iron hitching rack on the Square had been moved to a side street since there were so many autos it was dangerous to have teams on the Square.²⁵

Among the more visible improvements which the county bonds and the development of the Bankhead brought to Garland besides a paved and curbed main street were a new concrete bridge over Duck Creek on the west side of town. The Garland Square was landscaped with flowers and grass and a World War I memorial fountain erected there, presumably at least in part to make Garland’s downtown a more appealing stop for travelers on the Bankhead.²⁶

In 1923 Lake Garland, an impoundment of Duck Creek under the Bankhead Highway bridge, was purchased by a local entrepreneur, who dredged it and renovated the existing bath houses with an eye to creating an “auto tourist camp” there.²⁷ A tourist cottage park, Anderson Park, was developed on the Highway east of town in 1931 and a second such operation, Crenshaw Tourist Park, eventually opened on the Highway at the west side of town. About that same time Garland’s first miniature golf course was opened on the Highway near Lake Garland Park.²⁸

Besides lodging and recreation for travelers on the Bankhead Highway various other businesses to serve them sprang up along the route through Garland. Although Garland’s

Bankhead route extended through only 12 commercial blocks, by the mid-1940s auto travel-related businesses with Bankhead addresses included 5 auto dealerships, 3 auto repair garages, 3 auto supply stores, 9 restaurants, and 11 service stations. Although none of these is now in operation, several of the buildings that housed them still survive, adapted to other uses.

Parenthetically, it should be noted that apparently the Bankhead Highway was never officially designated by the War Department as a military highway, despite early predictions. It is, however, true that on 14 June 1920 the War Department launched an Army convoy over the route, thus giving the Bankhead Highway implied government recognition as the most important southern transcontinental route. The convoy consisted of 44 trucks, 7 automobiles, 4 motorcycles, 20 officers, 160 enlisted men, and the secretary of the Bankhead Highway National Association. The convoy stopped in every community on the way, presenting promotional programs. It finally reached Los Angeles on 6 October 1920. There is no report in the *Garland News* of the convoy coming through Garland, so it may have bypassed this part of its main route following one of its branch routes.

It is interesting to note that in 1924 Garland businessmen exulted over the completion of a paved route connecting Terrell on the Dixie Overland Highway to Rockwall on the Bankhead east of Garland. The Dixie Overland Highway at the time included an unpaved swampy section between Forney and the Dallas County line known as the “Forney Gap.” Since the “Gap” was impassable in rainy weather, the new connection would allow diversion of DOH traffic at those times through Garland on the Bankhead. The “Forney Gap” was not closed until 1931.

The Bankhead Highway Gets Name Changes

By the time the Bankhead Highway was completed America’s network of named “auto trails” had become quite complex and confusing to the traveler. Several of the named highways had branch routes. The Bankhead Highway had at least three branch routes. Many of these named trails shared portions of their route with other named highways. In fact, the Bankhead Highway and the Dixie Overland Highway shared the same route between Dallas and San Diego. Many of the named routes also had segments with state highway numbers, as did the Bankhead

Highway, which was also Texas State Highway 1. Each named auto trail did, however, have its official identifying signage. The Bankhead Highway sign was the black letters “BH” on a white background with wide yellow stripes across the sign’s top and bottom.²⁹

In an effort to standardize and simplify the identification of the nation’s major highways, the federal administration in 1926 officially discarded word names such as Bankhead, Dixie, Jefferson, Lincoln, etc., in favor of numbers. As a result, the Bankhead Highway’s new official federal designation became Texas Highway 1, but was also assigned U.S. Highway 67 between Texarkana and Dallas and U.S. Highway 80 from Dallas westward.³⁰ It was, however, several years before local usage abandoned the Bankhead name. In Georgia the Bankhead Highway name is still attached to much of its original route through the state. In Texas the current visitors’ center in Mt. Vernon is named the Bankhead Highway Visitors’ Center, and many other Texas towns retain the name on surviving segments of its route. The name remained attached to Garland’s main street at least until the early 1950s, and there is still a bypassed one-block portion of the route which retains the Bankhead name.

In 1931 the portion of the Bankhead Highway route between Texarkana and Dallas (including Garland) was designated part of the “Broadway of America Highway,” a tourist highway extending from New York City to San Diego via such cities as Washington, D.C., Nashville, Texarkana, Dallas, Ft. Worth, Abilene, El Paso, Phoenix and Tucson.³¹ (It is interesting to note that the practice of giving word names to auto trails had not been totally abandoned.) At that time it was reported that some 93% of the route was paved and that all grade crossings would be replaced with overpasses. Also in 1931 the local paper noted that the heavy traffic on the Bankhead Highway through the area was demanding further improvements in the route. The stop signs on the local Square had to be replaced by the city’s first traffic lights.³² And because the Bankhead paving between Garland and Dallas was only 18 feet wide, right-of-way was being sought to widen it to 36 to 40 feet.³³ It is generally accepted that the economic benefits deriving from the Bankhead and other such highway projects during the 1930s provided for many a buffer against the hardships of the Great Depression.³⁴

In 1936 a dramatic increase in tourist traffic through Garland over the Bankhead Highway en route to the Texas Centennial in Dallas created both new economic opportunities and demands for upgrading. The highway was widened through downtown and the city installed Centennial decorations for the highway and the Square. A local entrepreneur organized a room-rental bureau for accommodation of tourists. And the tourist cabin park on the west side of town was enlarged. The Memorial Fountain on the Square was refurbished and re-landscaped. The Chamber of Commerce erected on the Bankhead Highway at the city limits signs reading, “Entering Garland, the City of Beautiful Homes.”³⁵

Even though we have concentrated here on the growth in commercial development in Garland in conjunction with the Bankhead Highway, during the 1920s there was a significant residential development on its route as well. In fact, some six blocks on either side of the Bankhead Highway west of downtown became Garland’s “Silk Stocking Row,” boasting dramatic mostly Tudor-style brick homes of the town’s most prosperous businessmen. Even though now zoned for commercial use, a few of these beautiful houses survive, evincing the glory days of the Bankhead Highway.

In 1921, as the Bankhead Highway, extending some 3,000 miles from coast to coast, approached completion, it was estimated that its total cost would exceed \$100,000,000.³⁶ No later estimates have been seen. Nevertheless, the economic benefits it afforded from coast to coast during its lifetime are incalculable. Inevitably the usefulness of the Bankhead Highway, which in most places was but two lanes wide, diminished as traffic loads burgeoned in the 1940s and 1950s. With the passage of the Interstate Highway Act of 1956, drivers quickly opted for the wider, safer, and faster new interstates, which generally bypassed the downtowns once served by the Bankhead. The economies of these downtowns, until then so dependent on the traffic over the old highway, fell rapidly into decline. Garland was no exception, much of its Bankhead traffic diverting to Interstate Highway 30. Although there has been more than one effort at revitalization, its downtown has yet to fully recover the vitality of its Bankhead Highway days.

The old Bankhead Highway through downtown Garland is now named Main Street; from the west end of Main to I-635 it is South Garland Avenue; and thence to Gaston Avenue in

Dallas it is Garland Road. From the east end of Main Street the route of the Bankhead continues a short distance eastward on Bankhead St.; thence eastward on East Avenue A; thence eastward on Hwy 66 to Commerce St.; thence to where Commerce St. ends at Mills Rd. The segment of the original route east of Mills Rd. across the Rowlett Creek bottoms has been abandoned, but the Bankhead route picks up again in Rowlett.

¹ Jerry M. Flook, *Forney Country: A History of Northwestern Kaufman County, Texas* (Forney Historic Preservation League, 1998), pp. 118, 119.

² Monica Penick and Gregory Smith, "Statement of Historic Context Route 66 through Texas" (Texas Historical Commission and National Park Service, 2003), p. 1.

³ *Garland News*, 18 Mar 1910.

⁴ *GN*, 14 Apr 1911.

⁵ *GN*, 4 Aug 1911.

⁶ *Terrell Daily Transcript*, 6 Oct 1913.

⁷ *TDT*, 8 Jan 1914.

⁸ *GN*, 17 Oct 1913.

⁹ *GN*, 31 Oct 1913.

¹⁰ *GN*, 22 Oct 1915.

¹¹ *GN*, 4 Feb 1916.

¹² *GN*, 14 Jul 1916.

¹³ Richie Longfellow, "The Object Lesson Road" (US Dept. of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/back0607/cfm).

¹⁴ Thomas McAdory Owen and Marie Bankhead Owen, *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1921), p. 90.

¹⁵ *GN*, 15 Jun 1917.

¹⁶ *GN*, 22 Jun 1917.

¹⁷ *GN*, 27 Jul 1917.

¹⁸ "Texas State Highway 1." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Texas_State_Highway_1

¹⁹ *GN*, 27 Jul 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Dallas Morning News*, 8 Jul 1920.

²³ *GN*, 11 Mar 1921.

²⁴ *GN*, 22 Jun 1923.

²⁵ *GN*, 31 Aug 1923.

²⁶ *GN*, 8 Apr 1919.

²⁷ *GN*, 21 May 1924.

²⁸ *GN*, 17 Apr 1931.

²⁹ "Bankhead Highway." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bankhead_Highway

³⁰ "Texas State Highway 1." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Texas_State_Highway_1

³¹ *GN*, 17 Apr 1931.

³² *GN*, 6 Nov 1931.

³³ *GN*, 1 May 1931.

³⁴ "Preserving Texas History: The Bankhead Highway—Broadway of America." <http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~unclejoe/tx/bankhead.html>

³⁵ *GN*, 10 Apr, 22 May, and 12 Jun 1936.

³⁶ Owen and Owen, p. 91.