

TRAILS AND ROADS, OUR REGIONS INHERITANCE

Although Route 66, the famous highway from Chicago to California opened in 1926, receives considerable attention, important travel and trade routes were well established in Northeastern Oklahoma centuries before. Osage tribesman, migrants from Lakota tribes much further north, settled in west central Missouri and began to expand their hunting territory. They developed favored pathways to accommodate their hunting and war parties whose territory eventually extended from the Missouri south to the Red River and from the Mississippi west to the central plains. Portions of one particularly well worn path, the Osage Trace, became a favored route, first for tribesman, later for explorers and missionaries, then a well traveled highway for cattlemen and pioneers...and finally for us.

The Osage Trace extended from the Mississippi close to St Louis, long before that town was founded by the Chouteau's in 1765, then followed the Missouri River west and turned south near the present site of Jefferson City. Continuing southwest past today's Nevada, the route veered westward to the Neosho River Valley. Jesuit priests would establish an Osage Mission on the route, as it continued south to the mineral springs that later became Baxter Springs. Entering Oklahoma, the Trace traversed the state, north to south west of the Grand River, to what would become the Three Forks settlement southeast of Okay in 1806.

According to reports sometime in the early 1800s, when cowboys first herded cattle over 600 miles from east Texas to St. Louis, they used portions of the Osage Trace through Missouri. Its later importance as a through fare is illustrated by the fact that in the summer of 1855, when the newly created Second Cavalry, 600 troops including young Colonel Robert E. Lee, left Jefferson Barracks near St. Louis, to fight Indians in Texas, traveled the eastern portion of the Trace. Northbound, cowboys herded their cattle across the Red River, east of Sherman, Texas and wound their way past the Jack Fork Mountains to Three Forks. This was the confluence where the Verdigris and Grand Rivers join the Arkansas. During the early years, cattle bound for St. Louis, were herded across the Arkansas River near Fort Gibson, following the Grand River, then east to Fort Wayne south of Grove and northeast through Springfield, Missouri. Later, after the founding of Kansas City and St. Joseph, the trail to Baxter Springs on the west side of the Grand became more popular.

In addition to these two early roadways, later a third highway was created, a portion of which passed through our region. In 1838 Congress, concerned with what was then the western frontier of the United States, approved the construction of a Military Road to protect pioneers and settle tribal disputes. Initiated at Fort Snelling near St. Paul, Minnesota, the road was eventually extended over 1,000 miles to Fort Jesup near Natchitoches, Louisiana. In Northeastern Oklahoma, much of the road followed the old Osage Trace from Baxter Springs southwest to Cabin Creek Crossing and Rock Creek then leaving the Trace, it closely followed the Grand River, parallel to the Trace/Texas Trail a few miles further west, until reaching Fort Gibson. From that point it again joined the Texas Trail continuing nearly to the Red River before turning southeast toward Natchitoches and Fort Jesup.

Until a pathway was discernible from constant use, the Military Road was marked on the prairies by a plowed furrow to the left, and in wooded areas either trees were blazed or rock cairns were created to designate the roadway. Following standard procedures for government roads, trees that were in the path were cut, with stumps no more than 18 inches high, to allow clearance for wagon axles. After Congress approved the road, mounted infantry, called dragoons, organized in 1833, were assigned to assist in building and patrolling it. The portion from Fort Scott, Kansas to Fort Gibson was heavily contested during the Civil War, but its importance soon ended when that conflict was over.

The construction of the Missouri Kansas and Texas railway (MKT) in 1871 would signal the beginning of the end for the Osage Trace/Texas Road in our region. Surveyors who determined the route for the MKT soon discovered that in some segments, history trumped engineering. They were impressed by the fact that not only was it the best route, but that portions had been so densely packed by millions of hooves that had passed over, they were virtually ready for the rails to be laid on top.

Today both the railroad and U.S. Highway 69, initiated in 1926, follow those routes created by our predecessors. Their existence and continued use not only give credence to the axiom that “history repeats itself,” but also to the concept that “the more things change, the more they stay the same.”

