

DOWN U.S. 69...IN 1855

The Texas Road, an icon of the past not only remains important today, it serves as an example of how history builds upon itself. Originating as the Osage Trace, an Indian war and hunting path, then known as the Shawnee Trail, the Texas Road emerged in the 1800s as several routes to move cattle to northern railheads. During early years after reaching the confluence of the Arkansas, Verdigris and Grand Rivers, some herds were channeled up the east side of the Grand to St. Louis, but later the more popular route was the west side of the river to Kansas City, Sedalia, even as far as Quincy, Illinois. Today, U.S. Highway 69 generally follows the popular route through Oklahoma from Colbert, near the Red River to Baxter Springs, Kansas.

Just as the road developed for northbound cattle herds, after 1836 it also became the major route for pioneers bound south for the Republic of Texas that swelled in 1849-50 as a passage to California during the gold rush. By the late 1850s, more than 100,000 wagons were documented as having used the Texas Road. Consequently, travelers entering Indian Territory from Kansas on what would be an estimated month long journey to Texas, periodically needed supplies, to repair equipment and obtain fresh animals to pull the wagons.

At the time, the Texas Road was also on the western border of the American frontier. In 1837, Congress approved the development of a Military Road extending from St. Paul, Minnesota to Natchitoches, Louisiana to facilitate patrolling that border. Tree stumps were cut to 18 inches to allow wagon axles clearance and the road was marked either by a plowed furrow on the left side, by blazing trees in forested areas or by building rock cairns at mile intervals on the prairies. The section from the Spring River to Fort Gibson was completed in 1845, following the Texas Road past Joe Martin's plantation at Cabin Creek, then turning south near the west bank of the Grand River. After reaching Fort Gibson, the Military Road rejoined the Texas Road and essentially followed the same route to the ferry crossing at the Red River.

Today's travelers on U.S. Highway 69 and those early pioneers, would only recognize one town in common, Baxter Springs, then located on the northern border of Indian Territory. In 1850, A. Baxter, a squatter and self proclaimed Universalist missionary, had staked claim to the springs that flowed out of the hill and built a tavern along the Texas/Military Road. After leaving Baxter Springs, southbound pioneers would have continued to Knight's Tavern near Horse Creek southeast of today's Afton, then 30 miles further southwest to Martin's plantation. This was an important destination because pioneers could obtain the necessary supplies and equipment repairs they needed. Departing from Martins, they would turn south after a few miles, past the remnants of New Hopefield Mission, closed in 1837, and forty miles further, past Union Mission, also closed and marked only by the overgrown ruins of a few buildings and a cemetery.

Arriving at the Verdigris River, pioneers would encounter the remains of the Three Forks settlement founded in 1806 but decimated by unprecedented floods in 1833 and 1844. Crossing the river by ferry and arriving at the Western Creek Agency, near the future site of Muskogee, they would then continue southwest to Honey Springs and Shaw's Inn on Elk

Creek. A few years later, this placid setting would become the site of the most important Civil War battle fought in Indian Territory. Next stop would be North Fork Town, a community of 300 now inundated by Lake Eufaula. Thirty miles further south, they would pass the small settlement of Bucklucksy, with the objective of reaching the bustling town of Perryville, three and one half miles further southwest. Just a few years later, in 1868, Bucklucksy would become the more important destination when James McAlester constructed a trading post and general store there. McAlester became wealthy selling coal to the MK&T railroad and the town would prosper and soon be renamed McAlester. But now Perryville was the more important destination because there the California Trail bisected the Texas Road and some travelers turned west to Santa Fe and beyond. Those southbound, would continue to Boggy Depot, a thriving community in the Choctaw Nation, later to become a ghost town when MK&T engineers routed train tracks 12 miles east, resulting in the founding of Atoka. Pioneers would then continue south to Fort Washita, then to the Red River their journey across Indian Territory complete.

Events during the Civil War often centered on the Texas Road as a supply route, and when the MK&T Railroad was built in 1871 it followed the same path. But new communities replaced earlier ones to serve the needs of this modern form of transportation. Vinita, Pryor, Wagoner, McAlester, Atoka and others emerged as watering and coal resupply depots for steam engines. Later, in 1935, as the importance of the railroad diminished, U. S. Highway 69 was constructed over the trail. Indian warriors, pioneers, a war, early communities and the railroad have faded into history, but the Texas Trail remains as Highway 69, a viable passage way, an icon of history, and an *Echo From The Past*.

