

THE TEXAS TRAIL, MOTHER ROAD OF OKLAHOMA

Long before Route 66, that famed stretch of pavement from Chicago to Santa Monica, California was designated as the Mother Road, another well traveled highway existed in northeastern Oklahoma called the Texas Trail or Road. First an Indian path or trace, then a marked trail wide enough for wagons, it served as a link for immigrants beginning their journey from Springfield, Missouri west, then southwest through Oklahoma and on to Texas. In northeastern Oklahoma the road can generally be traced diagonally from Baxter Springs, Kansas to Afton, then diagonally north of Ketchum, across Cabin Creek, then south and east of Adair and Pryor. From there, today's U.S. Highway 69 generally follows the old trail to the Red River near present day Denton, Texas.

Roads as we know them today were not the roads of the 18th century. For example, probably the most well known link to the west, the Pennsylvania Turnpike that ran from Washington DC to the Mississippi River was, at best, a trail. Often it was just marked in prairie lands with a pile of rocks or in wooded areas a hatchet mark on the trees. These trails only became clearly defined roads after thousands of wagons passed over them, leaving an indelible trail marked by wheel ruts. According to some residents some ruts, evidence of the Texas Road, are still discernable west of Ketchum angling toward the historic marker near the junction of state highways 82 and 85.

In the first half of the 18th century around 1820, the road was traveled by Texas bound immigrants attracted by Mexican land grants, then after 1846 to the new state of Texas to homestead government land. They were joined in 1849 – 50 by California bound gold seekers. By the accounts of some who lived near the road, there was a constant stream of horse and oxen drawn wagons as well as travelers on foot and horseback. Documents confirm that by the late 1850's more than a hundred thousand wagons had passed by particular checkpoints on their way south and on west.

Although there was a distinguishable "highway" south worn by wagons and travelers, the same road served more as a point of departure for northbound cattle drovers. This industry began evolving in the late 1840's because of the growing demand for beef in the east so it became highly profitable to herd cattle long distances to the nearest railhead. From San Antonio throughout eastern Texas that nearest northern railhead was first to West Port (later called Kansas City) and after that to Baxter Springs, Kansas. By 1868 after Baxter Springs became a popular destination the Stockyards and Drovers Association boasted of having corrals for 20,000 head of cattle supplied with ample grazing land and water.

Interestingly, northbound travelers called the road the Shawnee Trail possibly because it passed a Shawnee Indian village on the Texas side of the Red River. After Texans drove their cattle north across the river near Colbert to begin the 300 mile journey across Indian Territory, they used the trail more as a reference point than a road to follow because the thousands of cattle required forage and water that led them off the beaten path. In addition, there were natural impediments for these

large herds ranging from forests to narrow valleys in the Jack Fork Mountains to river crossings further north. Later, there were man-made obstacles as homesteaders began farming the land adjacent to the road and Indian Tribes demanded payment for crossing their land.

As the road wound north beyond Muskogee where the Arkansas, Verdigris and Grand Rivers joined, it began to look like the end of a frazzled rope as drovers, looking for forage to fatten their cattle before selling them, found different routes to meadows of abundant blue stem grass on both sides of the Grand River valley. According to accounts of settlers, cattle herds could be found grazing from Afton on the west side of the Grand River, across the valley to White Water Creek southeast of Grove.

The life of the drover or cowboy on the Texas Road was somewhat different than that portrayed by Marion Morrison (aka John Wayne). It was not the life romanticized on the silver screenno gun fights or gettin' the girl. And, while "The Duke" might retire to his air conditioned trailer after a film session, possibly for a little libation, his trail hand counterpart after an 18 hour day in the saddle would be hoping for a meal, hot or cold, and clean water to drink. And while John sought the comfort of his bed on an August night such as we are experiencing now, the trail hand would be searching for a spot on the ground that appeared to have the least chiggers, ticks, and mosquitos and fall asleep exhausted. In short, there was nothing glamorous surrounding the daily life of a drover.

Traffic on the road slowed to a trickle during the Civil War because of the constant skirmishes between the Federals and Confederates as well as danger from "bushwackers" such as gangs led by Bloody Bill Anderson and William Cantrell. Major Civil War battles in Oklahoma, the battles of Honey Creek and Cabin Creek, also took place directly astride it. While the conflict was more or less a forecast of future diminishing use, the beginning of the end really came in 1871-72 with completion of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, "The Katy", was constructed from Kansas to Texas along generally the same route, at least from Vinita on south, thus ending much of the need for the road. Those who utilized it, both immigrants and cattle, could now ride to their destination in relative comfort. The passing of the Texas Road signaled the end of one era in Oklahoma, but the Katy, following the path of the "mother road", set the stage for a new era, the settlement of Indian Territory and Oklahoma's eventual path to statehood.