

The Drive is Fine on Route 69

by Jonita Mullins

Few roads in Oklahoma can claim as much history as Highway 69 which runs in a southwesterly direction from Miami to Durant. This stretch of road reaches back in time to the days when the Osage were the dominant people in the region. It has gone by many names in its two hundred years or more of existence- the Osage Trace, the Texas Road, the Military Road, the East Shawnee Cattle Trail, and the Jefferson Highway.

As early as the 1780s, the Osage had begun to settle in the Three Forks region near Muskogee. Their principal trade partners were the Chouteau brothers at St. Louis. The Osage traveled overland from the Three Forks to Missouri along a trail that became known as the Osage Trace. This trail, which followed the natural contours of the land, became the basis for the many roads that followed.

With the establishment of Fort Smith, Fort Gibson and Fort Scott, military roads were built connecting these posts. It was along these roads that many of the Five Tribes made the final leg of their tearful trail into their new homeland, Indian Territory. Since Indian Territory was set aside for Indians only, for years it was a place for pioneers to simply "pass through" on their way to settling the West. In the 1830s and '40s the Osage Trace was crowded with settlers heading out from St. Louis to Texas. The trail became known as the Texas Road. Grant Foreman described the route of the Texas Road:

One branch came from Baxter Springs, Kansas, and followed the Verdigris and Grand rivers to Fort Gibson. The other branch came from Saint Louis through Springfield and Maysville to Salina, and joined the other. The Texas road proceeded southwest from Fort Gibson past Honey Springs and crossed the Canadian River just below present-day Eufaula. The road continued on a southwesterly route to cross the Red River at Colbert's Ferry.

During the Civil War, several battles were fought in Indian Territory for control of the Texas Road, including the Battle of Honey Springs. During the decade of the cattle drives, the Texas Road became the East Shawnee Cattle Trail and hundreds of cattle were driven up from Texas to the railheads in Kansas.

Following the Civil War, these railroads began to forge into Indian Territory. The first was the Missouri-Kansas & Texas (KATY). The route chosen for this first rail line followed closely that of the Osage Trace, crossing the rivers at the fords established along the Texas Road. The railroad surveyors and engineers could not improve upon the instinct of the Indians and pioneers in choosing the best route. With the advent of the automobile, a "good roads movement" began in 1914 and civic and municipal organizations began working to pave the hard-packed "Indian road."

W.T. Meredith, editor of *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine in 1915, proposed the formation of a highway to run through the states that were part of the Louisiana Purchase. Meredith thought the road should be called the Jefferson Highway in honor of Thomas Jefferson's "greatest real estate deal in history." A call went out to the states making up the Louisiana Purchase to meet in New Orleans in November 1915 to discuss such a highway.

D.N. Fink, president of Commercial National Bank of Muskogee, attended as a delegate from the youngest state, Oklahoma. Out of that and subsequent meetings evolved the Jefferson Highway Association with the goal of building a "365-day road" (meaning it could be traveled even in wet, winter weather). The main cities along this highway were to be New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Denison, Muskogee, Joplin, Kansas City, Des Moines, St. Paul and Winnipeg, Manitoba. The route veered out of the Louisiana Purchase in that neither Texas nor Manitoba had been part of that great land deal.

The Jefferson Highway Association raised funds for the project by membership dues of \$9 per mile. Many counties also raised funds for the road through bond issues. So the road was a cooperative effort between government and private enterprise.

Oklahoma did its part in getting the highway built, following the route of the Texas Road. D.N. Fink, who had been elected vice president of the Jefferson Highway Association, reported in 1916 that he and his family had traveled from Muskogee to Joplin (149 miles) in "just seven hours." In 1925, highway commissioners from 11 states in the Mississippi Valley met at Kansas City to work on plans to bring state roads into a numbered federal highway system. The Jefferson Highway, being one of the best in America at that time, was made a federal highway. The Oklahoma portion of this road was designated U.S. Highway 69.

Road construction was delayed during WWI but it was projected that by 1929 the entire 2,300 miles of the Jefferson Highway would be paved, beating Route 66 which wasn't completed until 1938. The Jefferson Highway Association marked the entire route with blue and white directional poles and aggressively advertised it as a "tourist's delight." Recently a revived Jefferson Highway Association has been working to bring deserved recognition to this historic highway.

If 66 is "the mother road," then perhaps Route 69 could be called the "granddaddy of roads." It's past, rich in the history of people, places and events should be preserved and celebrated and the towns along the old Osage Trace should undertake to promote it as ardently as those who promote Route 66.