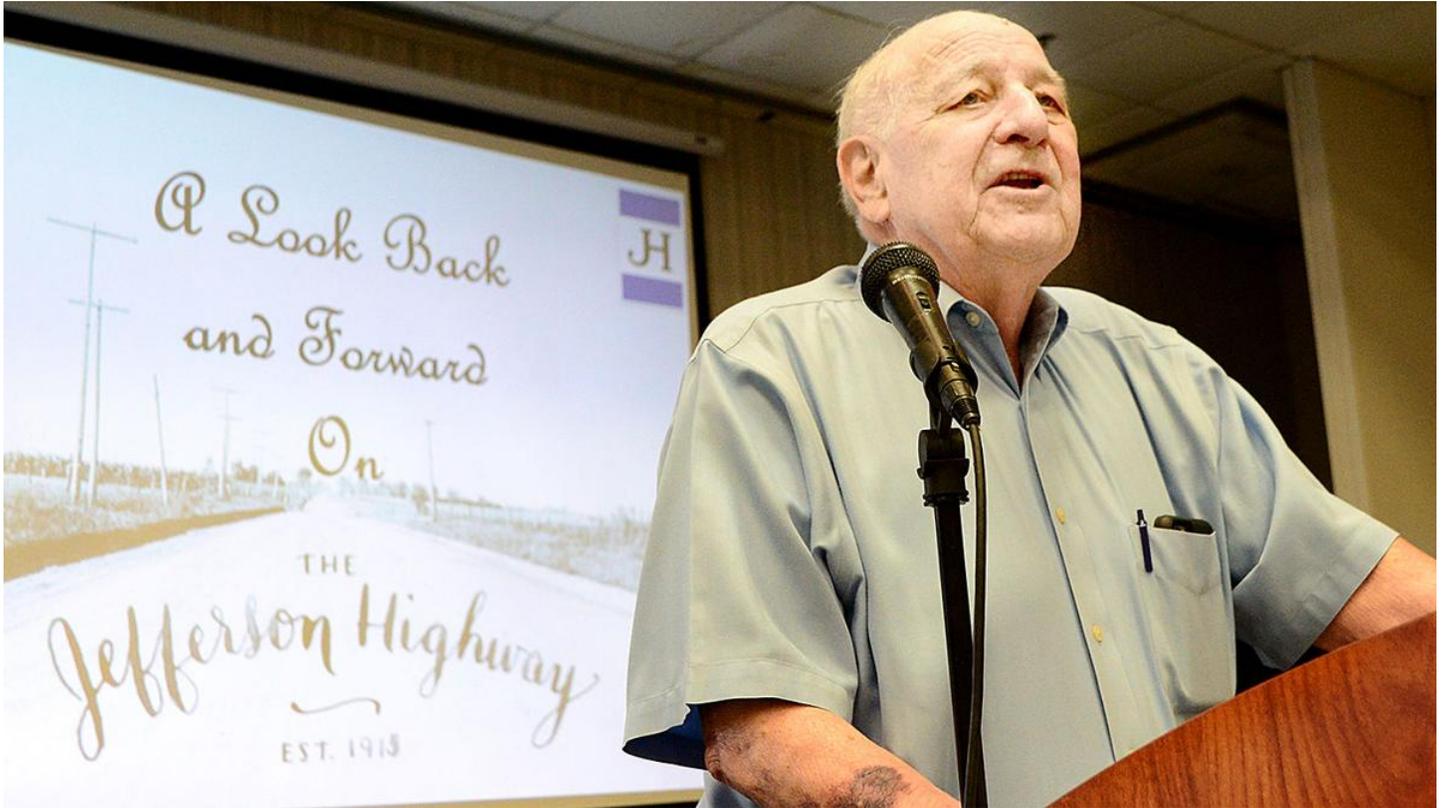


Jefferson Highway preservation efforts continue in McAlester



Glenn Smith, president of the Jefferson Highway Association, talks to attendees during a meeting Tuesday at the Southeast Expo Center in McAlester. Photo by Kevin Harvison | Photo editor

Local musician Lee McWaters plucked a bluesy rhythm on the guitar and sounded the harmonica before singing about the history of the Jefferson Highway.

The introduction set the tone Tuesday for a meeting of the Jefferson Highway Association at the Southeast Expo Center in McAlester before the association's president Glenn Smith and Roger Bell explained the vision of highlighting portions of the old highway — which portions of were renamed as U.S. Highway 69 and runs through McAlester.

"We believe it should be saved; we believe it should be remembered for younger generations," Smith said. The Jefferson Highway was established in 1915 and named to honor president Thomas Jefferson's "greatest real estate deal in history" for the Louisiana Purchase. The 2,300-mile highway stretches from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, to New Orleans, Louisiana.

Smith and Bell said during the meeting that the highway was constructed by citizens of each town — in addition to some prison labor — in which it was being built and funded in part by donations. Smith talked about the adventures road travelers had on the highway throughout the years and the importance of restoring the road for younger generations. The Jefferson Highway Association is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that works to preserve bridges, tourist camp sites, rest stops and other historic markers along the highway.

The highway was marked with metal signs with a conjoined "JH" sandwiched by bold blue horizontal lines — a symbol that was also painted on telephone poles, Bell said during the meeting. Members of the association and the McAlester Tourism Department hope to use similar signs in the area.

Bell said during the meeting that he is a historian and got involved with the association about seven years ago after driving the Jefferson Highway and realized he "enjoyed it more" and "it wasn't as commercialized."

Smith compared the Jefferson Highway to the historic Route 66, which stretches from Illinois to California. Route 66 travelers spend about \$38 million per year and spend an average of about \$100,000 per day, according to an economic impact study by Rutgers University. The study also said museums along Route 66 gain various investments amounting to roughly \$67 million per year.

Smith also reflected on the sentimental aspect of preserving Jefferson Highway, as people take pictures on the old bridges, at museums and landmarks and parts of the Jefferson Highway have been closed or rerouted — for example, parts of the highway can be seen in the middle of Lake Eufaula.

Bell said Old Town McAlester is a historic attraction along the highway, which also ran through McAlester on U.S. Highway 69 — also called North Main Street in town.

He added that McAlester's Busby Hotel — which is now the Pittsburg County Courthouse — is another historic building the association would like to feature along the route.

Bell read to those in attendance a letter from a Busby Hotel guest in 1919, as the guest praised the hotel service and amenities and recounted adventures along the Jefferson Highway.

“We're trying to find snippets and things like this so we can say and show people the history of the highway,” Bell said.

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http://www.mcalesternews.com/gallery/jefferson-highway-preservation-efforts-continue-in-mcalester/article_e36d86a2-74d1-11e8-8a32-1fa06bdae4a4.html