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Road aficionados to visit city

Jefferson Highway buffs pick Muskogee for 2015 convention

By D.E. Smoot Phoenix Staff Writer

There is a move afoot to raise public awareness about what became during the early 20th century the first transcontinental highway that dissected the United States from north to south.

Jefferson Highway eventually stretched from Winnipeg, Manitoba, to New Orleans and incorporated a conglomerate of federal, state and local roads.

Intense local interest and support from civic leaders brought the highway — now known as old U.S. 69 — through Muskogee. History buffs see that move as one of the keys to Muskogee's past and possibly to future tourism.

Glenn Smith, a local member of the recently revived Jefferson Highway Association, said the organization will celebrate its centennial by bringing its 2015 convention to Muskogee. The event is scheduled for April 30 through May 2 next year.

The association was formed in 1915 as part of a "good roads" campaign sweeping across the nation. It was inspired by a similar organization that pulled together the means to build the Lincoln Highway, which stretched from New York City to San Francisco.

Smith said that when the association met for the first time in New Orleans, organizers expected 50 to 60 people to attend. More than 300 showed up, including more than 50 from the Muskogee area.

"They were able to get the road routed through Oklahoma instead of going due north through Arkansas through the pledge of building better roads," Smith said, noting that at the time, there was no federal or state highway funding, leaving the burden to fall upon local governments. "David Fink (a Muskogee banker) apparently was a master at developing bond issues, so he put together a million-dollar bond issue in Muskogee County and assured the people they could do it over a five-year period."

The bond won approval and officials went to work building the portion of Jefferson Highway that eventually became known as U.S. 69, stretching from Dennison, Texas, to Miami, Okla. Fink's involvement earned him a spot in 1916 as a top executive — some accounts identify him as vice president and others as president — with the Jefferson Highway Association and ensured that the highway came through Oklahoma.

District 1 Commissioner Gene Wallace said he and Bob Burgess began researching the historical value of old U.S. 69 when the Muskogee (Creek) Nation invested about \$8 million in road improvements. Wallace said their research turned up "some very distinctive things for Muskogee that turned out to be pretty exciting."

"We found an old document dated from 1916 where there were just 22 registered cars in the city of Muskogee," Wallace said. "They petitioned city leaders to build more roads because they didn't have but nine miles they could drive around in town."

That changed as the Jefferson Highway wound its way through Muskogee. Smith said old U.S. 69

entered Muskogee from North York Street, veered west on Gibson Street and then headed south on Eastside Boulevard. Smith said Spaulding Park became a popular “auto tourist park” along the Jefferson Highway.

“A lot of people camped out during those years, and Spaulding ... was acclaimed all over this area as the finest tourist camp on the Jefferson Highway,” Smith said, noting that Spaulding could accommodate up to 200 cars per night. “Even (the city of) Dallas commented on it and built one to match it — Muskogee was quite a town in promoting itself back in those days.”

Both Smith and Wallace believe the historical significance of the Jefferson Highway equals that of Route 66, which many consider the United States’ “mother road.” With much of the original Jefferson Highway in use around the area, both believe it could be used to bolster tourism in Muskogee and in other towns in eastern Oklahoma.

“Think of the success of Route 66 and how people come from all over the world to drive that road,” Smith said. “We don’t expect the Jefferson Highway will ever reach that point, but if we can only attract one-tenth of what they do it would be a big plus ... to all the small towns up and down the road — including Muskogee.”

Smith and Wallace hope the Jefferson Highway Association’s convention will catapult that effort. They will be working with local entities to pull together ways to make that happen.

“We still have a lot of miles of the old road we can promote, and there are still a lot of the buildings still standing,” Smith said. “I think it’s a big boost for the city of Muskogee.”

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