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Old Spanish Trail Highway Turns 90

SANTA FE, December 7 - Few would believe it today, but the narrow dam spanning the Rio Grande south of Mesilla once carried America's first southernmost transcontinental highway — the Old Spanish Trail.

Launched on Dec. 10, 1915, the Old Spanish Trail (OST) stretched the length of the continent, linking the coastal winter playgrounds of Florida and California and paving the way for interstates 8 and 10.

Open for travel in 1929 at a cost of over \$80,000,000, the Old Spanish Trail Association called it the most expensive and most highly engineered of all the transcontinental roads.

Accidental roadbuilders

The idea of the first cross-country borderland road arrived as an afterthought. In 1915, Mobile, Ala. boosters found their city's fortunes slipping. Tourist routes developing to the east and the west promised thousands of snow-fleeing Northerners and their dollars. But Mobile, a city deriving most of its income from its declining port, found itself isolated and without a tourist route.

At first Mobile attempted to heist from Mississippi the Jackson Highway, a new road directing chilly tourists from Chicago to New Orleans. Using population statistics, the boosters claimed that routing the highway through Mobile — though 95 miles longer — would have a greater benefit to the South than a road through Mississippi.

After Mississippi won the Jackson, Mobile switched to promoting an east-west highway. Named the Old Spanish Trail, the idea was first to simply connect the popular Dixie Highway in Florida with the competing Jackson Highway at New Orleans.

Discovering that a road from New Orleans to San Diego was already in the works, the idea soon expanded into a 2,700-mile cross-country artery, shuttling winter tourists between the coasts.

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The Old Spanish Trail got its official launch on December 10-11, 1915 at a good roads convention in Mobile. The 419 delegates from Alabama, Florida, Texas, Arizona, Louisiana and Mississippi, though bickering over the exact route of the new highway, formed the Old Spanish Trail Association.

Despite the initial enthusiasm, progress on the highway stalled three years later as the project faced nearly 200 miles of impenetrable swamp between Pensacola and New Orleans.

These setbacks, along with a change of focus to the war in Europe, brought the Association to a standstill in 1918 as it failed to even hold one of its annual conventions that year.

Texas takes over

The Old Spanish Trail Association folded in 1919 and a new group made primarily of Texans took hold. The reformed association forged its new direction at a November 1919 convention in San Antonio. Filling out the convention were 130 delegates from West Texas — ranchers and small-town boosters — who promised to build a missing link of the highway between San Antonio and El Paso.

San Antonio, a city steeped in the romance of Spanish missions, took charge of building the trail into a national highway.

Then came Herral Ayres. Herral Ayres a New Jersey businessman, who had moved to San Antonio to convalesce from exhaustion, assumed the role of managing director. A shrewd promoter, Ayres worked relentlessly to draw attention to the highway — by whatever means.

The road with a Spanish accent

While there was no actual cross-country historic Spanish trail, the modern highway ran roughly parallel to the expedition routes of De Soto, De Vaca and De Navarez, as well as mission trails in Florida and Texas.

With these strands, Ayres wove a believable story of the highway's romantic past, highlighted in thousands of OST travel brochures issued between 1923 and 1931. Ayres made the contemporary driver feel as though they were following the “footsteps of the padres and conquistadores.”

The romantic spell of the OST resulted in much press, but did little to fix the troublesome Gulf Coast section. Unlike competing highways to the north that stitched together existing roads across the continent's flat and dry midsection, much of the OST needed to be built anew, including 31 expensive river crossings.

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Along with these challenges, the Old Spanish Trail Association quickly discovered that the federal government and many of the individual states along the route were unwilling to cooperate in the financing its construction, which delayed its completion 15 years.

Finally, with a declaration from Congress calling attention to the tourist and military importance of the OST, followed by federal designation of sections of the trail as U.S. highways 80, 90 and 290, the dream of the Mobile boosters came to reality.

To celebrate its completion in 1929, St. Augustine hosted a three-day party, including the dedication of a six-foot diameter coquina stone monument marking the beginning of the trail. A representative of the King of Spain dedicated the trail and later honored Ayres with the title of Knight Commander of the Royal Order of Isabel la Catolica.

The lure of the Old Spanish Trail continued to captivate travelers until the early 1960s, when new interstates diverted cars off the old road and its scenery.

Traces of the trail still exist today, including the coquina monument in St. Augustine and a marker in San Diego designating the trail's end. In between lie hundreds of miles of bypassed two-lane sections of U.S. 80, 90 and 290, each with small towns, mom-and-pop restaurants, and the same historical attractions advertised in the Old Spanish Trail travel guides.

The U.S. 90 Gulf Coast segment took a heavy beating with Katrina. Biloxi nearly lost the venerable Hotel Tivoli, and dozens of fine homes that once lined the beach boulevard were destroyed.

The trail lives on

Inspired by the success of organizations that have preserved parts of Route 66 and the Lincoln Highway, two groups in the Southwest have begun publicize the Old Spanish Trail.

Drive the OST, a Santa Fe-based group, has crisscrossed the old highway, documenting its findings on their web site.

"Forget the corn-soy-corn monotony of the north; the OST cuts across a diverse country of moss-draped Southern plantations, Spanish missions, white-sand beaches and stark desert scenery," says historian John Murphey, founder of the group.

To celebrate the 100th anniversary of its opening, the San Antonio-based OST 100 is planning a large cross-country motorcade in 2029. Co-chair Charlotte Kahl hopes that the motorcade will lead people to "revitalize and preserve sections of the Old Spanish Trail."

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Part of the problem is the name. While both groups are trying to get communities to recognize the Old Spanish Trail, the recent federal historic trail designation of a 19th century trade route between Santa Fe and Los Angeles - bearing the same name - only confuses the matter.

But just like Ayres decades ago, Kahl and Murphey believe its romance and scenery will inspire modern drivers to retrace the Old Spanish Trail again.

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For additional information (including local details) visit

www.drivetheost.com, or contact

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