



Old trail may get new life

Tourist highway cuts through Tallahassee

By Gerald Ensley
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The trail was named by early 20th century boosters of a highway from Florida to California to capitalize on the growing automobile tourism trade. The Cottages at Lake Ella were part of it. A marker at Monroe and Brevard streets was part of it.

Folks in Crestview celebrate it every year. And if a San Antonio organization is successful, people from California to Florida will celebrate its centennial in 2029.

The Old Spanish Trail is making a comeback - with a goal of reviving tourism in cities and towns along the way.

"People come from Europe every year to drive the Lincoln National Highway; there are books, tapes, it's a whole cult," said John Murphey, a New Mexico architectural historian. "(Reviving the Old Spanish Trail) can be a boon to small town heritage by getting people off the interstates."

The Old Spanish Trail (OST) was the name adopted by early 20th-century boosters of a highway from Florida to California to capitalize on the growing automobile tourism trade. It was one of many "named" highways across the nation, the most famous of which was the still-existing Lincoln National Highway from New York to California.

In 1915, the OST Association held its first national convention of civic leaders and Chamber of Commerce officials. Over the next 14 years, the association's lobbying helped spur building of an \$80 million network of federal, state and private roads, most notably U.S. Highways 80 and 90. In 1929, the network was complete and a convoy of association members drove from St. Augustine to San Diego and back to inaugurate the OST.

A romantic name

The name was always a romantic fiction: There never was a coast-to-coast trail trod by Spanish settlers, though the OST followed some of the paths used by Spanish explorers in Florida and California.

But early attempts to promote the Florida-to-California project as "Orange Groves to Orange Groves" or "Playgrounds to Playgrounds" fell flat. In 1919, San Antonio businessman Herral Ayres became the chairman of the OST Association. Ayres was the driving force in getting road-building money - and giving the network a romantic name.

"Once Ayres started summoning up images of conquistadores and padres, people really got enthused - and that's when it took off," said Charlotte Kahl, president of the modern OST Association, based in San Antonio.

The OST Association sprung back to life in 2000, after road-widening in San Antonio uncovered an old OST-marked roadside bench amid some overgrowth. The group has restored OST landscaping and signs in San Antonio and is planning a centennial celebration in 2029.

The organization is asking each of the 67 counties in eight states along the route to put up signs, plant trees and record oral histories with residents and business owners. Tallahassee Mayor John Marks has promised Kahl the city will support the centennial, "though I don't know the level or kind of support." Marks labeled himself "enthusiastic" about the centennial because it will amplify Tallahassee's efforts to promote tourism at 17th century Mission San Luis, which is on U.S. 90.

The OST Association plans a coast-to-coast convoy in 2029 and hopes the centennial will lure more visitors to communities along the trail.

"In 2029, we are throwing a gigantic, nationwide party." Kahl said. "We are going to restore the Old Spanish Trail and make it a tourist attraction."

Tallahassee on board early

The OST was an engineering triumph as bridges were built over swamps, rivers and bays along the Gulf of Mexico coast that previously served as barriers to automobile traffic. It was a boon to local commerce as thousands of gas stations, motels, restaurants and shops opened to serve the driving public.

Tallahassee was on board early. Led by a Mrs. F.R.S. Phillips, Tallahassee hosted the OST Association's third national convention in 1917, after winning an endorsement of its goals from Florida Gov. Park Trammell.

By the 1930s, the trail ran through Tallahassee as U.S. 90, which then followed Monroe Street north to Havana before it turned west. Numerous Tallahassee businesses sprung up along U.S. 90 to serve the growing automobile tourist trade, including a complex of tourist cabins that remain today as the small shops of the Cottages at Lake Ella.

In 1955, a Tallahassee chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution erected an OST marker on the southeast corner of Monroe and Brevard streets, which is still standing.

Into the 1960s, U.S. 90 and U.S. 80 continued to be identified by OST markers in many cities. But the name began fading in the 1970s, as Interstate 10 replaced U.S. 90 and 80 as the main highway from Florida to California.

Portions of the 1929 OST highway remain in the Florida Panhandle: Two 9-foot-wide, brick roads near Milton and an unpaved, 17-mile section from Sneads to Marianna.

The biggest reminder is in Crestview, 150 miles west of Tallahassee on U.S. 90, which has hosted an annual OST festival since 1956. Their 50th anniversary festival, a two-day extravaganza of historical re-enactments, music, beauty pageants and a parade, will be held in April.

"We think (the festival) is the greatest thing under the sun," said Bob Lynn, an organizer since 1959. "We need to remember where we came from and some of the problems our people had years ago."

Murphey expects similar enthusiasm from other communities as the centennial approaches. A historic preservation planner with New Mexico state government, Murphey said there were nearly 200 trail associations in the 1920s. But the OST Association and the Lincoln National Highway Association were the most successful. They galvanized government investment in road building, attracted national media coverage and formed a vital part of American driving history

"There is a lot of attention paid to the Lincoln National Highway - but I think the Old Spanish Trail is a better story," Murphey said. "It's a story of a long arduous attempt to build a highway across the Gulf Coast states and connect the two coasts."

Want more information on this story? Visit: oldspanishtrailcentennial.com and drivetheost.com

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FINDING THE TRAIL

The most visible reminder of the Old Spanish Trail in Tallahassee remains at the southeast corner of Monroe and Brevard streets - though it has lost its key feature. The concrete stone-and-obelisk marker beside the sidewalk once had a large medallion reading "Old Spanish Trail Highway" and a metal plaque commemorating Mission San

Luis. The marker was erected in 1955 by the Caroline Brevard chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Though the medallion was still in place as recently as the 1990s, it has been removed.

The rest of the marker remains.

DAR officials don't know what happened to the medallion, which also included a DAR insignia. But they plan to refurbish the Mission San Luis plaque and they support the marker's continued presence.

"I hope the city doesn't make us remove it," said Sue Bratton, the DAR state vice regent.

Ross Airom, a city traffic engineer, said he was unaware of the marker but said, "If it doesn't create a traffic hazard, I would not remove it."

---Gerald Ensley

The Old Spanish Trail designation was given to U.S. 90 in North Florida, which ran along North Monroe Street to Havana until the late 1960s. The trail stretched from Florida to California.

Florida State Archives