

# OST100 ROADSHOW 2005

## SAN ANTONIO, BEXAR COUNTY, TEXAS

BY CHARLOTTE KAHL

As auto highway travel became popular and convenient, goods and tourists from the north were driven to New Orleans and Miami with ease after 1910. Battle House Hotel owner S. H. Peck wanted some of that traffic to visit Mobile. In 1915 a connecting highway from New Orleans to the east coast of Florida was proposed with the name Old Spanish Trail. At that time New Mexico and Arizona had only been US states since 1912. Annual OST conferences were held and the idea eventually expanded to become the OST transcontinental gulf and border highway (1, p43).

Development was delayed by the Great World War. As plans resumed, a Dallas route was plotted across Texas (1,p43). Civic leaders and businessmen from San Antonio packed the July 1919 Houston OST Conference with the intention of having the route pass thru San Antonio, a city of great Spanish heritage (2,p8 &1,p43). San Antonio was chosen to lead the movement. Promoters left that convention with ideas of connecting 6 centers of historical interest: St. Augustine, New Orleans, San Antonio, El Paso, Tucson and San Diego (3,p3).

The earliest theme for the OST was "from orange groves to orange groves." Leafy oranges were depicted in artwork (4). Promoters next chose "from playground to playground (5)," predating Disney popularity. During 1919 a New Englander visiting San Antonio, Herral Ayres was chosen as National Managing Director with OST headquarters in the San Antonio Gunter Hotel (1.p43). It was Mr. Ayres who began using the conquistadores and padres theme for this all weather highway (6). His concise, factual attention to detail went into the history of each section of OST promotional materials (7,p2). His picturesque wording of the natural beauty to be found in the varied coastal, mountainous and desert regions holds true and enralls travelers even today (1,p2). The man could write and was not timid about speaking to chambers of commerce, civic groups and legislators at every level to insure the OST became a continuous transcontinental highway (2,3&8).

By the November 1919 San Antonio OST convention, pledges of support had been gathered and councilors appointed all across Texas, one-third of the total OST (2.p8). The Old Spanish Trail was not built upon the easiest route. Nearly half of the water of the US drains into the gulf needing expensive and sometimes long bridges (2, p11). Sea walls were constructed in Mobile (3,p5). The drive over the present bridges in the swamps of Louisiana on IH-10 is an awesome example of the engineering and road building skills of those who labored on this first auto highway (2,p10). The earlier Spanish King's Highway from Mexico City through San Antonio, El Camino Real de los Tejas bypassed those swamps by heading north to Nacogdoches and Natchitoches and the U.S. (1,p6).

Kerrville organized the first OST Association Founders Club (9) to promote the highway route through the scenic hill country with sport hunting and fishing along the Guadalupe and Llano watersheds (10). The rock terraces across the ravines built with the stone removed from the solid mountainsides are still beautiful along route 27. Phoenix also wanted the highway, accounting for that upward swing from Tucson. The OST meanders from fort to fort and mission to mission across the southern US. St. Augustine, Pensacola (still prominent militarily was used by the very early Spanish to guard the mouth of the Mississippi)(11), Ft. Stockton, Ft. Bliss and on to San Diego, a major US Naval facility. The downward drop of the OST west of the New Mexico/Arizona border leads travelers to a cluster of missions in Mexico (1,p36). The OST had auxiliary loops. Early travelogs encouraged driving the 30-mile Evangeline loop in Louisiana to visit the historic Acadian area of Longfellow's poem (12). Bandera, Texas still has an OST Cafe on the loop popular for those wanting to see Camp Verde where Jefferson Davis sent the US Army Camel Corps for training (13). Promoters of the OST in San Antonio also saw to it that Randolph AFB was placed upon the OST military route (14).

Many saw the Texas hill country and vast stretches of ranch land as the expensive highway sections to be built. These areas moved quickly. Mississippi and Alabama were not prosperous states and the southern bayou counties too far from the capitals to attract the investment to build the expensive bridges and sea walls needed to link Biloxi and Mobile (3,p4). Without county or state funding, that area needed federal help. Mr. Peck put up the \$900 to send Herral Ayres to Washington during the last half of 1922 (8,p5).

On March 9, 1916 Francisco (Pancho) Villa raided Columbus, New Mexico. The US Army sent John Pershing after the Mexican invaders. This military operation was the first mechanized US Army expedition. Fuel tanker trucks had to be built in San Antonio to supply the long trek west. This prepared the US Army to support the Allied effort of the Great World War (15, Chapter 5). Fredericksburg Rd. was named Foch Highway in honor of French Field Marshall Ferdinand Foch, Allied Commander credited with winning the Great World War (16). He visited San Antonio Dec. 7, 1921 (17). Pershing, upon his return to Washington, began preparing a map of military defense routes across the US. The OST was not on early drafts of that Pershing Map (8,p5).

As Mr. Ayres, with the help of Congressman Harry Wursbach, gathered signatures of the majority of US senators and congressmen to declare the OST a basic trunkline of a US system (3,p4); and with Mexican/German diplomatic ties strengthening (15,p174), General Pershing placed the southern gulf and border route on his military map. J. M. Wainwright of the US War Department declared the highway an essential element of US defense, assuring every mile of the OST would be included in Federal programs (8,p6). The Texas section of the OST moved quickly and by 1927 when the US government began looking for a site to build an air training facility, OST promoters Wursbach and Judge Robt. L. Ball and the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce were able to organize donation of the land along the OST and successfully lobby for the placing of Randolph AFB in eastern Bexar County (14).

0-Mile Stones have been placed in St. Augustine, FL and San Diego, CA. On March 27, 1924, with much ceremony, Texas governor Pat Neff unveiled the OST 0-Mile marker stone on San Antonio City Hall grounds (18). The plaque on the stone is worded: "ZERO MILESTONE OLD SPANISH TRAIL - St. Augustine, Pensacola, Mobile, New Orleans, Houston, San Antonio, El Paso, Tucson, Yuma, San Diego - Dedicated by Governor Pat. M. Neff - Erected by the San Antonio City Federation of Women's Clubs - Mrs. J. K. Beretta, President."

The State Federation of Women's Clubs, as well as the State Highway Commission and the Old Traildrivers Association all held their annual conventions in San Antonio that week to allow as many as possible to participate in the festivities. A stage coach brought greetings from the Governor of California, dignitaries spoke, 90 year-old teamsters were honored, the mixed horse drawn vehicle and auto parade passed as Boy and Girl Scouts posted the flags of 5 nations (18).

The Officers of the Old Spanish Trail Association were: President S. H. Peck, Mobile, Alabama with the Executive Board all from San Antonio, Chairman Kenneth Wimer, Secretary Percy Tyrrell (Robt. E. Lee Hotels President), Treasurer Leon N. Walthall, Attorneys the firm of Birkhead, Lang and Beckmann, with Managing Director Herral B. Ayres (1,2,7,12).

As the men worked to promote bridge building and paving of the highway, in 1923 an auxiliary group was formed to begin promoting enhancement of the roadway (1,p44). State governors appointed heads of the OST Beautification Department (19). Chairwomen for that group were Mrs. Henry Drought followed by Mrs. Frank W. Sorell and then Mrs. Henry A. Moos, all from San Antonio. A group was set up in San Antonio to manage the national beautification(20). They worked with architects and landscapers on designs for OST road and historical signage; state, county, city and town gateways; roadside parks and property entrances. Blueprints, photos and drawings would be mailed on request. They drafted legislation on wandering livestock and advertising signage, and established cooperation with state highway departments for engineering and maintenance guidelines (8,p9). The 32-mile Headquarters Section from San Antonio to Boerne was adopted to gain the practical experience necessary to lead other localities. Groups from Bexar and Kendall Counties worked together to develop the county line monuments and roadside park, widen the right-of-way to 100 feet, remove unsightly fences and signage and encourage native stone property entrances and walls (3,p6).

Both the OST Board and the Beautification Department drove many miles of the various sections of the OST during the decade of building and beautification, meeting with engineers, architects, contractors and bankers to get the highway built and with Chambers of Commerce, civic groups, hotel and restaurant owners to encourage beautification and promotion. Herral Ayres wore out 3 of his own automobiles (21). Upon completion of paving, San Diego, California with great help from Mrs. F. W. Sorell, of the Alamo Mission Chapter of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas and the Trail Beautification Department, organized the first national motorcade from San Diego to St. Augustine in April of 1929 (3,p9). Altho' few autos made the whole

trip, the core group would pick up auto clubs from various cities and counties who would follow along for a short way. As the motorcade came thru' Bexar County, they were met in Balcones Heights and escorted to the Gunter Hotel for a banquet sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce (22). A reverse trip was made from St. Augustine to San Diego in October 1929 (5& 3,p10).

On April 29, 1930 a very elegant ceremony was performed at the home of Mrs. Henry Drought to induct Herral Ayres into the Confederation of the Royal Order of Isabel la Catolica (the 1492 Isabel and Ferdinand). This Royal Order was presented on behalf of His Majesty King Alphonse XIII of Spain, making Ayres a knight for his ten years of leadership in carefully gathering and disseminating the history of early Spaniards in the various Old Spanish Trail areas. The actual medallion was to be returned to Spain upon Ayres' death (23).

Herral Ayres was a New England investment councilor visiting San Antonio for his health when recruited by the Chamber of Commerce to head the building of the OST (24). He hadn't expected it to take a whole decade. Ayres was very eager to return home to finish his own book The Great Trail of New England about a colonial trail. He closed down the Gunter Hotel OST office in 1931 and returned north (8).

In 1936, the Alamo Mission Chapter of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT) placed a pair of stone benches commemorating the OST just outside San Antonio city limits at the Vance Jackson intersection of Fredericksburg Rd (25). The City Hall 0-Mile Stone, one of the DRT benches, remnants of the Kendall/Bexar County gateway and Balcones Creek Park walls and caretaker's house are documented as relating to OST development (2,p23;3,p6;7,p40).

The search continues for stone or landscape enhancements added by developers, businesses or residents during the 1920s and 30s as requested by the Beautification Department. Interstate highway construction has overlaid much of the Bexar County OST, but early stone enhancements can be seen in the 2400 and 16000 blocks of Fredericksburg Rd.

OST paving was completed in 1929. The depression delayed into the late 1930s and early 1940s, building of supporting businesses; hotels, motor courts, gas stations, restaurants and entertainment facilities. Tourist travel over graded roads with camping in tourist camps became popular following WWI (1,p41). With the end of WWII the ability to again buy gasoline and tires and drive on paved highways created a resurgence of auto travel, motel building and restaurant chain development. The long highway names, Old Spanish Trail, Lincoln Highway, Dixie Highway were replaced by the numbering system, taking the glamour of the conquistadores and padres from the Old Spanish Trail as it follows Alternate 90 across the gulf states, routes 78, 87, 27 and 290 thru' San Antonio and Texas and route 80 along the Mexican border.

During the 1990s, portions of Fredericksburg Rd. were reconstructed (26). Questions arose about the stone bench at Vance Jackson. Upon learning the history and importance of the Old Spanish Trail auto highway, the members of the present Alamo Chapter of the DRT restored the remaining bench and landscaped the area (27). This led to plans for revitalization of the OST in San Antonio and Bexar County in preparations for OST centennial celebration activities. OST100, The Old Spanish Trail Centennial Celebration Association was formed to locate, revitalize and preserve the roadway, businesses and historic sites of the original 1920s Old Spanish Trail auto highway. San Antonio City Council (28) and Bexar County Commissioners Court (29) support was obtained at the end of 2003. The website, [www.OLDSPANISHTRAILCENTENNIAL.com](http://www.OLDSPANISHTRAILCENTENNIAL.com) was donated by Grande Communications to bring together the 67 OST counties in 8 states to recognize the accomplishments of the early road building pioneers with a decade-long celebration beginning with a 2015 Mobile organizational reenactment (30), followed by convention reenactments (1,p43) and 0-mile marker reenactments (San Diego 11/17/23, San Antonio 3/27/24 and St. Augustine 4/3/29)(3, inside cover) and 2029 motorcade reenactments.

The Old Spanish Trail Centennial Association meets in San Antonio **O**n the **S**econd **T**uesday of each month. Minutes of those meetings are posted on the website along with OST TRAVELOGS, OST Counties Links and other OST100 information. This ROADSHOW text has accompanying photos, documents and maps available for presentation in Bexar County by contacting OST100. Neighborhood Associations throughout Bexar County are inventorying their corridors of the OST to support revitalization and preservation efforts. OST100 meetings, Neighborhood Association meetings and public hearings about development or improvements are open to anyone interested in community activities. OST100 encourages individuals and public and private entities to become involved in preparations for the centennial celebration.

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