

The Automobile Comes to Clark County

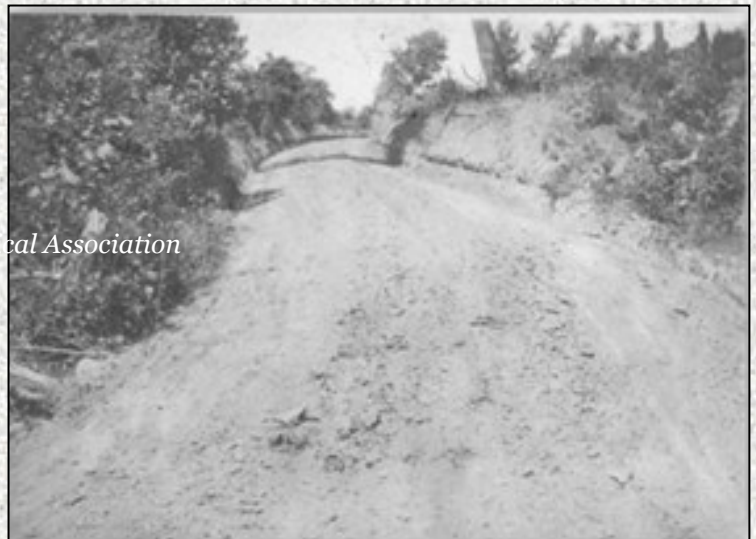
Arkansas stood at the dawn of the age of the automobile with the turn of the twentieth century. As of 1903, some fifty Arkansans owned the new vehicles. In fact, a Hot Springs man drove to Arkadelphia that year “on his automobile” creating quite a stir, for it was the first car that many people had ever seen. By 1910, about twenty-five Arkadelphians owned automobiles--those people became known as “automobilists” or even “autoists.” A revolution in transportation had begun.

As the number of autos increased around Arkansas, the state established the Highway Commission in 1913 to systematically administer Arkansas roads. The agency began assigning official highway numbers in 1917, and the Ozark Trails Association even produced a map that included distances measured between white rings that had been painted on posts and trees. Locally, some signs were put up in 1916 when R.W. Huie, Jr., Chick McDaniel, and Sam O’Baugh installed some on the Hot Springs Road, “by way of the mountain route through Bismarck.” The men “measured off the distances and put up signs along the entire way.” The signs indicated the number of miles to the Caddo Hotel, and were placed at road crossings where “a traveler is more liable to lose the way.” Adding authenticity to this effort, the local newspaper proclaimed that “the accuracy as to the distances was measured by a speedometer.” In 1923 the Harrelson Road Law established a state highway system.

In the 1800s and into the twentieth century, local governments shouldered responsibility for road construction and maintenance. Outside of cities, the County Court administered the roads. Except for the Military Road, which had been built by the federal government during Arkansas’s territorial period, local men did all of the work. The Clark County Court appointed men to serve as “road overseers” to care for the roads in the immediate vicinity of their homes, usually for a term of about three days per year. The court’s records are filled with not only appointments, but also many instances of fines being assessed to those failing to fulfill the duties of their appointment.

Prior to the time the State began to require auto registration and display of license plates, a number of Arkansas cities (including Little Rock, Pine Bluff, Hot Springs, Fort Smith) issued license tags or plates. The state’s license plates have quite a fascinating history. For example, at first, regulations required that motorists display both a front and rear plate, and for 1928 through 1931, those plates actually included the words “front” and “rear” on them (since 1944, only a rear plate has been required). Into the late 1920s and early 1930s, only the abbreviation of the state’s name (ARK) appeared, instead of the complete spelling. The first slogan utilized on Arkansas licenses was in 1935, when officials applied the words “Centennial Celebration” in recognition of the 100th anniversary of statehood in 1936. In 1941, plates read “Opportunity Land.” After 1950, the slogan “Land of Opportunity,” continued on plates until 1967. The slogan returned in 1975, but only for a few more years. The state’s new nickname of “The Natural State” first appeared on plates in 1989. And, as many may recall today, Arkansas license plates utilized “county numbers” from 1957 to 1967 to designate the place of registration.

Some Clark County road improvements, circa 1917



Clark County Historical Association