

[Introduction, Elegy for a Great Highway—3]

As with so many huge projects, this one began with a huge lie, one that seemed essential for the *San Antonio Express-News* reporters who covered the banquet: “The secret of course is that never has this Old Spanish Trail project been a promoter’s plaything. It was organized and has been directed by the people of the South.” Such a facile lie. Without a federal mandate, the highway was a thing of the developers and Chambers of Commerce as a cursory look at the board of the OST shows. Later, after the project had begun, the federal government backed it as a “military necessity” (during World War I), but early on it was the “plaything” of developers though it did benefit all of us who used it.

I am driving through southern Louisiana, headed home to San Antonio, and have been over the past few days on the OST along the Mississippi coast where Jefferson Davis’s home Beauvoir faces the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. I have driven through the Bankhead tunnel, named after Tallulah’s father, the governor of Alabama long before we had ever heard of George Corley Wallace, and I have, only recently driven on U.S. 90 into Tallahassee where one of my uncles was once District Attorney. The highway is not what it once was. It is difficult to look at it and think of those men who raised the money to build the bridges and pay for the asphalt.

As Harrel Ayres said that day in 1929, “One of the first triumphs was celebrated in Florida with bands and barbeque when \$55,000 was gotten together for a vital bridge. That bridge, over the Apalachicola River, was not opened until many years later, and then the cost stood at over \$800,000.” One small triumph among many that led to the completion of a narrow strip of highway that my family and I have driven for decades to reconnect with family in Florida and in Tucson. The great transportation routes of our nation’s history (waterways, railways, highways) do that: allow family connections to be made while making it possible for families to spread throughout the country.

I am writing this to commemorate a great highway and a great undertaking before the IH-49s of the country make those earlier rivers of asphalt disappear