

Elegy for a Great Highway

I. Introduction

I am driving down a two-lane, black top road, headed home to San Antonio, Texas. The road winds through small towns in the parishes of southern Louisiana, through towns like New Iberia, Morgan City, Houma. Towns that have a heavily French-Acadian influence. I have dined on an oyster po-boy in Iberville, crawfish in Morgan City and have, for the past two hours been listening to zydeco music on a radio station from Lafayette. French influences though I am on the Old Spanish Trail, U.S. Highway 90 and U.S. Highway 80, two names for a single highway that stretches from the old Spanish missions of San Diego, California, through San Antonio, Texas, and east and south to San Augustine, Florida.

Along the way, the Old Spanish Trail climbs the Rocky Mountains, crawls across the deserts of Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona, crosses more than 800 miles of Texas, bridges the Atchafalaya watershed of Louisiana and the Mississippi River, dives through a tunnel into Mobile, Alabama, forms a barrier between the wealthy homes of summering Mississippians and the sometimes stormy waters of the Gulf Coast and bends through Florida, past Tallahassee and east to Jacksonville. It's one hell of a trip, close to the ground, and one that is vanishing as the interstate highways increase their domination of cross-country travel.

When I stop for a few moments outside a small town in southern Louisiana to read a sign alongside the highway (proposed IH-49 route), the faint odor of a dead armadillo adding to the swampy smells, I pull out a photocopy of a small pamphlet I have carried with me. It is the program of the October 7, 1929, Old Spanish Trail Association Banquet which was held at the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio. The keynote speaker at the banquet was Harral Ayres, Managing Director, Old Spanish Trail (OST), and people had come by motorcade from as far west as San Diego and as far east as San