

[Introduction, Elegy for a Great Highway—2]

Augustine. The highway was almost complete, only a few bridges left, and cars could make the trip. On the back of the program is an advertisement: "Overland to the Pacific: The San Antonio and San Diego Mail-Line." The ad is for a stagecoach trip over much of what would later become the Old Spanish Trail. The \$200 fare included refreshments and baggage, armed guards to see the stage through Indian country, mules for a hundred mile trip through the deserts that the stage could not make and outfitting if passengers should need assistance. The trip would take close to a month. A similar trip on the OST would take only two days and required no transition to mule back. The cost would be about the same.

Harrel Ayres' job as speaker that day would be to congratulate the various city boosters from big cities and small towns along the highway route. The building of the highway was not, initially, a federal mandate like the interstate highway system, but was a product of local enthusiasm and fund-raising. "When that meeting of 419 enthusiasts met at Mobile in 1915," Ayres said, "and organized the 'Old Spanish Trail' project, I doubt if any of them really comprehended the big achievements that were destined in the name of that enterprise."

At the moment, stopped beside the highway, looking at a proposed new interstate highway project, smelling a dead armadillo, OST, U.S. Highway 90, looks puny. Two lanes that stretched across the country, through arguments about whether bridges should have tolls or not (only a few did, most in Mississippi), whether the route should divide in Texas for a southern and a northern approach (it did, traveling north to Dallas and south to the border with Mexico), how to cross the Mississippi at New Orleans, mile-wide river that would rely on Huey P. Long for its spanning. These were big ideas, huge projects, men of business and politics to argue the routes and raise the money and men of muscle and sinew to do the actual work and, in some cases, die. Two pitiful little lanes, pothole-ridden, yellow stripes down the middle. Stooped along this part of it, I lie down on the highway and touch one side with my fingers and the other with my toes.