TRAINS AND ROUTE US 66

Route 66 in Oklahoma

US Highway 66, known simply as Route 66, affectionately as the Mother Road, and also as the Will Rogers Highway, arrived in Oklahoma in 1926. It entered the State in the far northeast corner and proceeded southwest through Vinita and on to Tulsa. Continuing southwest, the highway eventually reached Oklahoma City. The road snaked through the metropolitan area by a series of left and right turns, eventually exiting on the western boundary. (See below) From there, Route 66 aimed due west, passing through Weatherford and a number of smaller towns before reaching the Texas border. The highway was constructed by cobbling together a number of existing Oklahoma state roads, some of which were not even paved. The most notable of the State roads incorporated into Route 66 were SH 3 (Postal Highway) and SH 7 (Ozark Trail). Although most of the historic highway has now been replaced by Interstates, Oklahoma has the longest sections of the original Route 66 which can be driven by motorists.

Railroads in Oklahoma

Compared with surrounding states, the railroad came late to the future State of Oklahoma. The Civil War had ended and the Transcontinental Railroad had been completed before the rails were laid in the territory. The first railroad in the state was the Missouri, Kansas and Texas (MKT), known as the Katy. In 1870, the Katy was granted permission to construct a north-south passage through Indian Territory in the eastern part of today's State. The Atlantic and Pacific (later the Frisco) was allowed to build a line westward from the Arkansas border. Many settlers of the famous 1889 Land Run actually arrived riding on the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe (ATSF) that ran north-south through the center of the State and the future Oklahoma City. Expansion was rapid so that even before Statehood in 1907, many rail lines had been laid and the State was crisscrossed by dozens of different railroads. Towns sprang up all along the many rail routes. Almost all goods and farm products were shipped by rail, and in many cases, railroads were the only means of transportation for folks to move from one area to another. However, by the 1920s, the rail empire had reached its peak—due primarily to automobiles and trucks and maintained roads. It comes as no surprise that the start of the decline in Oklahoma railroads matches well with the arrival of the Mother Road.

Route 66 and Oklahoma Railroads

Which came first, roads or railroads? Not an easy question to answer simply. In some cases, railroads were laid along pre-existing dirt trails. On the other hand, many actual roads were laid parallel to established rail lines. So, it is not surprising that the route of US Highway 66 does in fact match rather well with historic rail lines in Oklahoma. This can be seen when maps of the two systems are superimposed. Entering the State in the northeast corner, the Mother Road approximates the route of the St. Louis-San Francisco Railroad (the Frisco) which had taken over the original Atlantic and Pacific. In fact, Route 66 closely followed the SL-SF line all the way to Oklahoma City. From Oklahoma City to the Texas border, US Highway 66 follows the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad (the Rock Island). This close match is not surprising: both railroad and highway surveyors naturally select the easiest and most direct routes.

Route 66 in Oklahoma City

From the City of Oklahoma City website: "In Oklahoma City, the original alignment of U.S. Highway 66 entered the city from the northeast on N. Kelley Avenue, went south to the former Grand Boulevard (present-day Interstate Highway I-44), turned west for approximately one-half mile, then turned south on Lincoln Boulevard. It went south on Lincoln Boulevard to the State Capitol at 23rd Street and turned west again. The route followed N.W. 23rd Street west to Classen Boulevard and turned north/northwest. It followed Classen Boulevard to N.W. 39th Street, where it then turned west to follow N.W. 39th Street out of the Oklahoma City limits to Bethany and continued generally due west. These original alignments through Oklahoma City would be used until 1930 when the first realignment was made." Realignments made in the 1930s transferred the Classen section first to Western Avenue and later to May Avenue.

The section of Route 66 on N.W. 23rd Street west of the State Capitol passes under the north-south route of the former ATSF Railroad (now BNSF). A portion of the former Parsons Kansas to Oklahoma City, Katy line, which passes by the Oklahoma Railway Museum at N.E. 34th Street, was parallel with Route 66 from Luther to west of Arcadia in the northeast part of Oklahoma City. Visitors may wish to visit the Santa Fe (Amtrak) and Union Depots in Oklahoma City. They can also ride on the Oklahoma City Trolley and/or passenger trains operated by the Oklahoma Railway Museum.

By Steve Kamm, 7/4/2022