

Three Rivers Historian

Winter 2015

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Jefferson Highway: The Granddaddy of Oklahoma Roads

In 1914, Henry Ford began producing his Model T on the assembly line. This brought the price of a car down to about \$300 and put it within almost everyone's reach. Suddenly America was able to travel like it never had before. And this created a need for good roads.

Some roads, like the Texas Road through the Three Rivers region, had been so well traveled for so long that they were wide and hard packed. Travel along such routes was relatively easy except in very rainy or snowy conditions. But most roads throughout America, except for the cities, were simple dirt wagon tracks, difficult for automobiles to travel and impossible for any mode of transportation when wet and muddy. Thus a "good roads movement" began in 1914 and civic and municipal organizations began working on the need for better roads.

Edwin T. Meredith, editor of *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine in 1915, proposed the formation of a highway to run through the states that were part of the Louisiana Purchase. Meredith thought the road should be called the Jefferson Highway in honor of Thomas Jefferson's "greatest real estate deal in history" in 1803. A call went out to the states making up the Louisiana Purchase to meet in New Orleans in November 1915 to discuss such a highway. D.N. Fink, president of Commercial National Bank of Muskogee, attended as a delegate from the youngest state, Oklahoma.

Out of that and subsequent meetings evolved the Jefferson Highway Association with the goal of building a "365-day road" (meaning it could be traveled even in wet weather). The main cities along this highway were to be New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Denison, Muskogee, Joplin, Kansas City, Des Moines, St. Paul and Winnipeg, Manitoba. The route veered out of the Louisiana Purchase in that neither Texas nor Manitoba had been part of that great land deal. This was necessary in part, because in 1915 western Arkansas had no roads!

The Jefferson Highway Association raised funds for the project by membership dues of \$9 per mile. Many counties also raised funds for the road through bond issues. So the road was a cooperative effort between government and private enterprise.

As early as 1916 a relay "sociability run" was made along a portion of the "Pine to Palm" road as it was being called. Nearly 500 cars took part in this effort to advertise the road and build cooperation between the communities along the route.

Oklahoma was doing its part in getting the highway built, following the route of the Texas Road. D.N. Fink, who had been elected vice president of the Jefferson Highway Association, reported in 1916 that he and his family had traveled from Muskogee to Joplin in "just seven hours."

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Down the Texas Road

Long years before the white man entered this western country, the greater part of Missouri, Arkansas, eastern Oklahoma and Kansas was dominated by the powerful Osage tribe. This area was a hunter's paradise, and these Indians claimed it as their own.

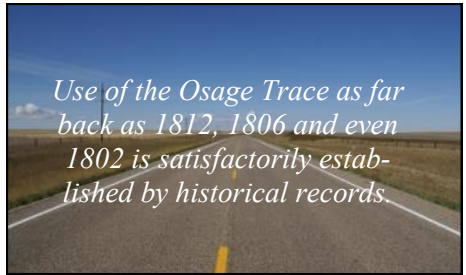
There were no highways but the trails of the Indians; the war trails over which the warriors traveled when they went on horse stealing expeditions or to battle with some intruding Indian band, or when they went to carry war into an enemy's country. They were also peace trails on which

whole villages traveled on hunting expeditions or to a salt lick or the salt plains to collect that most essential article of diet. They were trails leading to the traders' stores to which they carried their season's accumulation of furs and peltries

to exchange for ammunition, knives, beads, vermilion, and a multitude of other things essential to their lives.

The most important of these trails led through the forests and over the prairies to the French frontier town of St. Louis, where the Chouteaus and other famous traders were engaged in an extensive and profitable trade with the Indians. On various occasions these enterprising merchants brought their wares into the heart of the Osage country where they set up trading posts on the Osage River in Southwest Missouri, at the Grand Saline and the famous Three Forks, located at the junction of the Grand, Verdigris and Arkansas rivers.

These establishments were connected by a trail leading from St. Louis which became known as the Osage Trace and over which passed a picturesque volume of traffic and merchandise. Its use as far back as 1812, 1806 and even 1802 is satisfactorily established by historical records.



Trading expeditions from St. Louis also came over this Trace on the way to and from Santa Fe, and stopped to rest and repair equipment at Fort Gibson and the Three Forks.

The route from St. Louis cannot be precisely located as it was subject to change with varying seasons, flooded conditions of the streams, and the conditions of grass on which the ponies and ox teams of the travelers were dependent. But the journals of officers who conducted parties of emigrant Ohio Indians through St. Louis and on to northeastern Oklahoma are helpful in definitely locating the route. They went up the north side of the Missouri River almost to the site of Jefferson City where they crossed the river and continued southwest to their destination.

A large company traveling from St. Louis in 1829 left a detailed account of this route. Delegations from the Choctaw, Chickasaw and Creek nations in the southern states, conducted by government agents and army officers, took this roundabout course on an exploring expedition to inspect the lands offered them in the future Oklahoma by the Government in exchange for their homes in Alabama and Mississippi.

Lieutenant Washington Hood, a topographer with the expedition, kept a journal in which he set down features of the country which he observed along their route. The group passed the Osage Agency and the town of the Osage chief, White Hair, on the west side of the Neosho River near the site of the village of Shaw in Neosho County, north of Parsons, Kansas.

The expedition was soon within the limits of the present boundaries of Oklahoma. The travelers continued on the Osage Trace until southeast of the site of Vinita they came to Planche Cabin Creek, so called because of the presence of a cabin remarkable for having been built of plank and not of logs. Crossing Cabin Creek they continued past Chouteau's trading post, Union Mission, the Three Forks, and Fort Gibson and then traveled on to the Canadian River.

This route by that time had become a well traveled road. Emigrants, hunters, trappers, traders, explorers and military

detachments, seeking the easiest grades and routes across the prairies, mountains and streams, followed the Osage Trace to the Three Forks or continued on the same southwesterly course to the Red River and on into Texas.

Many homeseekers and adventurers stopped for temporary residence in the fertile river valleys of the Indian Territory and moved on to Texas when forced by the Government to retire before the advance of the immigrant Indians who had been placed in possession of the country.

Caravans of covered wagons conveying emigrants from Missouri and Illinois, and freighters with their boxes and bales of merchandise traveled over this road. As the expeditions proceeded south they met returning wagons empty or loaded with skins and peltries, discouraged settlers on their way back home, drovers of Mexican mules and wild horses intended for northern markets.




The volume of emigration to Texas through the Indian Territory was of considerable proportions and continued to increase until during the time of the Mexican War there was a steady stream of white-topped wagons and caravans passing over the road. In March 1845, it was reported that a thousand wagons had crossed the Red River into Texas in six weeks.

Beginning as early as 1822 this great highway helped to populate Texas and served important pioneering traffic north and south through eastern Oklahoma. For half a century, until the coming of the railroad in 1872 thousands of restless homeseekers were seen in motion along this road. Also traveling the road were the creaking and rattling ox-drawn wagons beside which the drivers walked and popped their long whips, military expeditions,

Civil War regiments of the North and South, exploring expeditions, trains of freighters, and herds of wild horses being driven north. All these types of travelers passed over the great broad road and left scars on the prairies which may be seen to this day.

Naturally then, this great thoroughfare that gave access in such volume to Texas became known as the Texas Road. It was so called in contemporary vernacular, in current newspaper accounts, in army correspondence and on maps of the period. When a company of hopeful Illinois emigrants outfitted themselves and departed for Texas their calculations included nearly a month of travel through the Indian Territory over the Texas Road, before crossing into Texas. Everybody who talked about the route knew this part of it by that name.

It was quite natural also that a road of such great utility, importance, and interest should become identified with the history of the times and of the country. Therefore it is quite within the



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realm of fact to state that for two hundred miles of the extent of this great thoroughfare there are more locations, features and associations of historical interest and significance than are to be found on any other highway of even much greater extent west of the Mississippi River.

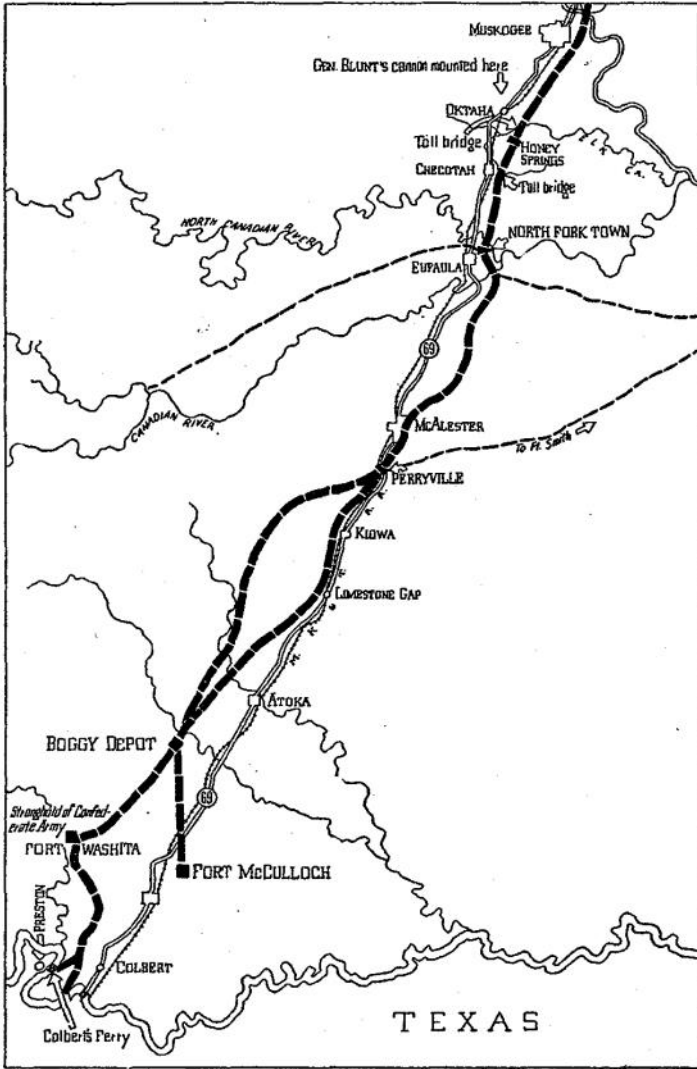
The importance of the Texas Road is exemplified by its influence on contemporary and subsequent history of the country. The first railroad built in the Indian Territory, the Missouri, Kansas and Texas, followed the route of the old road and gradually absorbed the traffic that had previously traveled over that thoroughfare. Approximately, it touched the historic places linked by the old highway—places whose importance diminished with the changing conditions of the country.

The instinct of the Indians, the traders, pioneers and emigrants who discovered the shortest, easiest and most practicable routes through the wilderness, who adapted their course to the topography of the country and who chose suitable camping sites and stream crossings, was not surpassed by the trained surveyor with his expensive instruments. It is an interesting fact that when this railroad survey was made through Indian Territory, the route adopted was almost identical to the Texas Road.

And now the automobilist follows it as the most direct route to Texas and the flyer looks down on the shining rails of the railroad as his guide. The Texas Road, the M.K. & T. Railroad and the Jefferson Highway that in company entered Oklahoma in the northeast corner of the state still in company cross the Red River into Texas.

It would seem obvious and appropriate to perpetuate the memory of this old road by naming a portion of the motor highway the Texas Road and by adequately improving it as a tribute to the patience and fortitude of the pioneer who laid out and painfully covered its distance with his oxen or horse teams, unconscious that the course blazed by him would in time be charted and relied upon by the man flying through the air.

—*Grant Foreman*
1936



The Texas Road from Muskogee to Preston, Texas

*This map is included in the booklet "Down the Texas Road"
by Grant Foreman*

In 1925, highway commissioners from 11 states in the Mississippi Valley met at Kansas City to work on plans to bring state roads into a numbered federal highway system. The Jefferson Highway, being one of the best in America at that time, was made a federal highway. The Oklahoma portion of this road was designated U.S. Highway 69.

Road construction was delayed during WWI but it was projected that by 1929 the entire 2,300 miles of the Jefferson Highway would be paved, beating Route 66 which wasn't completed until 1938. The Jefferson Highway Association marked the entire route with blue and white directional poles and aggressively advertised it as a "tourist's delight." In Muskogee, the Kiwanis Club built a tourist camp at Spaulding Park that could accommodate 200 cars and camps were also built at Miami, Pryor, Eufaula and McAlester.

- *Jonita Mullins*



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2015 Annual Conference

Muskogee, Oklahoma, USA

April 30 ~ May 2, 2015

The Jefferson Highway through the Indian Nations

Experience the culture, history and western heritage found along the Jefferson Highway in the youngest state on the route.

- Learn highway history in Oklahoma
- Explore the road in vintage trolleys
- Tour the Creek Nation and Black Towns by bus
- Enjoy classic cars at Spaulding Park and a classic Will Rogers movie at the Roxy
- Be entertained by “Hank Williams” at the OK Music Hall of Fame
- Hear Banquet speaker Michael Wallis

Registration at Jeffersonhighway.org
More information available at Jeffersonhighwayinoklahoma.com

Hosted by Three Rivers Museum

Summit, One of Oklahoma's All Black Towns

Muskogee County is the home of two historically all black communities always celebrated during the month of February. The "All Black Towns" designation means communities formed and operated after the Civil War by recently freed African Americans.

Surviving towns include Boley, Brooksville, Clearview, Grayson, Langston, Lima, Red Bird, Rentiesville, Summit, Taft, Tatums, Tullahassee and Vernon. Many of these towns are within an hour's drive of Muskogee and most are located in the Creek Nation.

Summit is one of the two All Black Towns located in Muskogee County. It is among the communities still being operated as originally planned and is located on the old Jefferson Highway.

It is uncertain when Summit became a center of settlement for African Americans. It was in the Summit vicinity that the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad planned to establish a depot and railroad division headquarters in 1872. Major John Foreman prevented those plans from fully developing when he poured a barrel of salt into a well.

The MKT railroad tracks passed the community on the west side. The railroad left an old wooden box car on a siding in January, 1887. Two men used it to establish a telegraph station at Summit. They lived and slept in the box car, too.

At one time there was a collection of livestock holding pens and a platform for shipping purposes. A fire on August 2, 1902 destroyed most of the pens. The railroad primarily used the platform and pens for shipping farm production during the summer harvests.

The United States Post Office established service for the community in 1896. Mark L. Minter was the first postmaster.

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Muskogee's Pioneer Road Booster

David Norvell Fink, who was mostly known by his initials rather than his full name, was born in August 1868 in Shelby County, Ohio. His family moved to Missouri shortly after he was born. D.N. Fink and Lillian Beaty were married February 9, 1898 in Southwest City, McDonald County, Missouri, according to Missouri marriage records.

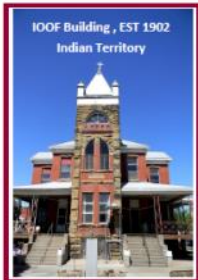
D.N. Fink came to Muskogee in 1898, then moved to Grove, Oklahoma where he was with the First National Bank in that area. In 1901 he returned to Muskogee where he joined Commercial Bank. He worked his way up the ladder to become president of that bank and celebrated twenty years with it on September 4, 1921.

He was one of the pioneers from Muskogee who wanted better roads. He attended the meeting at New Orleans in November 1915 as a delegate of the Oklahoma group proposing the

—continued on page 15



Other Local Attractions:
The Katy Depot
Heartland Heritage Museum & Gallery
Honey Springs Battlefield
Also enjoy Checotah's Downtown Antique Stores -
Specialty Shops - Dept Stores - Boutiques



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The paving of Jefferson Highway during the 1910's opened up transportation for Summit residents. This initially improved commercial prospects for the town. In the long term, however, residents found greater employment in Muskogee.

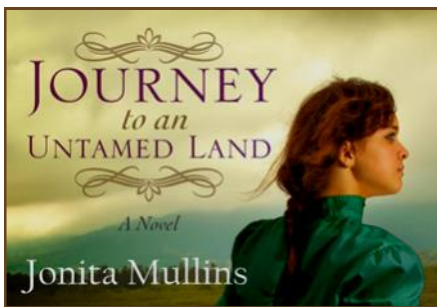
Jumping ahead thirty years, the Summit school received a Works Progress Administration grant in 1940. The \$13,782 grant funded the construction of an addition and improvements. The grant authorized the employment of twenty-six men to work on the Summit school project.

As the economic opportunities drew employment to Muskogee, Summit's population began to dry up. A wolf hunt conducted there in 1948 illustrates how rural the area was becoming.

Summit is beginning to improve after a long decline. The town is now being led by Mayor Greg Smith. He is working to bring more businesses into town. At the same time, he continues working to improve services offered by the city. He is building on the success ten years ago that created Summit's new civic center.

Bootsie's Restaurant is a major business enterprise in Summit today. It is located at 6303 Oktaha Road. This is the Old Jefferson Highway that a segment of US 69 bypasses. The menu provides a full list of meals for all tastes. The congenial and cheerful owners constantly work to improve their building and make Bootsie's a great stop on the old highway.

—Wally Waits



Read the story of Union Mission established near the Osage Trace in 1821. Every notable traveler on the old road paid a visit to the mission during its operation.

Available now at the
Whistlestop Gift Shop!

Upcoming Events at Three Rivers Museum

Treasure Hunters Show

Saturday, February 28, 10:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

If you have always wondered what treasure hunting is all about or just want to see what others have dug up, come out and visit with the Indian Territory Treasure Hunters Club and the Three Forks Treasure Hunters Club. Their members will be available to answer your questions about treasure hunting and show off the artifacts they have unearthed.

Historic Cemetery Tour

Saturday, March 7

Tour trolleys leave from the museum at 10:30 a.m. and again at 1:30 p.m. The tours give a glimpse into the past with historical characters portrayed by current Muskogee citizens. Tickets are \$12 per person or \$10 for members of Three Rivers Museum. Reservations required.

Daffodil Day

Saturday, March 28, 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

The Muskogee Garden Clubs hosts this tea at the Thomas-Foreman Home abloom with spring bulbs.

Jefferson Highway Centennial Conference

April 30 to May 2, 2015

Celebrate the Centennial of the Jefferson Highway with a host of classic events. See page 10 for all the details.

Railroad Day

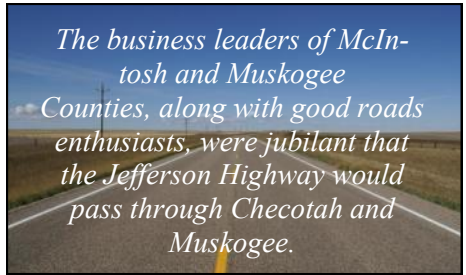
Saturday, May 30, 10:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Young and old alike will enjoy model train layouts, railroad exhibits throughout the museum and a guided tour of the 1940's era switch engine. Admission is free.

Jefferson Highway through the Mississippi River Valley to Canada. Fink was elected vice president of the Jefferson Highway Association and returned to Muskogee to announce that the area roads must be improved to secure Muskogee's place on the map. The board would make their final selection based on the extent of road improvements during the coming year.

The *Checotah Times* newspaper on November 19, 1915 stated that "Oklahoma Wins in its Fight for Route of the Jefferson Highway." The tentative route selected was through Louisiana, Texas and Oklahoma and was planned to come through Checotah and Muskogee on the way to Canada. It was a compromise between several routes suggested by the delegates.

E.T. Meredith of Des Moines, Iowa, who was the originator of the Jefferson Highway movement, was elected president of the organization by acclamation and the board of directors elected D.N. Fink of Muskogee vice president. Edward Swinney of Kansas City was treasurer and Walter Parker of New Orleans became general secretary.



The business leaders of McIntosh and Muskogee County, along with the enthusiasts in the campaign for better roads were jubilant over the announcement from New Orleans. The landing of the Jefferson Highway was as good as a new railroad, many of them declared. Hundreds of automobiles touring the country from north to south would pass through the area every month. If government aid could be secured for the construction of a permanent road, the promoters believed the Jefferson Highway would become the greatest public road in the United States.

A debate raged in Muskogee County over the funding of new roads to become part of the Jefferson Highway. A news article in the *Muskogee Times-Democrat* on June 7, 1916 shows the leadership ability of D.N. Fink. He proposed that Muskogee

County issue bonds to build roads that would benefit everyone, including all automobile owners — farmers, bankers, doctors, deliverymen and oil men.

The Jefferson Highway boosters met at the Severs Hotel and quickly raised over \$1,000 to pay the assessments due the state and national administrations of the highway association, with the remainder to begin exploring the possibility of a bond issue for the highway.

Those present at the meeting heartily agreed with D.N. Fink that any bonds voted for good roads in the county should have as their first aim the providing of roads to the various towns of the county so that the farmers should also receive the benefits of the expenditures. By this plan the entire county would profit from the north to south highway.

Mr. Fink set forth the proposition whereby the county should vote a million dollars in bonds for road building. One quarter of this amount to be issued at once, the rest in similar amounts at intervals in one year. The county would thus not assume the whole debt at once, nor would there be a sudden spasm in road building and the funds all spent at once.

In June 1916 the local newspaper noted that 16-year-old Norvell Fink, son of D.N. Fink, drove the family car from Muskogee to Joplin and made record time in the 150 mile drive, averaging 25 miles per hour. He was driving the new Oakland Six which his father had recently purchased.

On the return trip much better time was made until Miami was reached, and a rain storm was encountered that caused him to slow down. From Joplin to Miami an average speed of 30 miles per hour was maintained. Young Fink was said to be one of the most skillful drivers in Muskogee.

In November 1916 D.N. Fink was unanimously elected president of the International Jefferson Highway Association at their meeting in the Severs Hotel in Muskogee. The *Muskogee County Democrat* stated, "Mr. Fink is one of the most enthusiastic and consistent good road boosters in the United States."

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Call for Articles

The Three Rivers Historian welcomes articles about the history of the Three Forks region of Oklahoma covering Cherokee, Mayes, McIntosh, Muskogee, Okmulgee, Sequoyah, and Wagoner Counties.

Upcoming issues will feature the following themes:

Spring 2015 Women of the West

Summer 2015 The Five Civilized Tribes

Please submit articles of 750 to 3,000 words in length to The Historian, 220 Elgin Ave., Muskogee, OK 74401 or by e-mail to 3riversmuseum@sbcgobal.net or to the editor: Jonita.mullins@gmail.com

Test Your Knowledge

This freight business clearly turned down no client. Service ran along the Jefferson Highway from Muskogee south. The date of the photo is 1922. What building in Muskogee sits in the background?



Answer: The Severs Hotel

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Your membership helps us provide a safe environment to care for, preserve and protect the artifacts that represent our area history. It also helps us provide support for the museum operations, exhibits and special events. In addition, your membership provides support for the Thomas-Foreman Historic Home, owned by the museum since 2004.

Three Rivers Museum of Muskogee, Oklahoma, Inc. is a 501c3 non-profit corporation. Your financial contributions are gratefully accepted.

Basic benefits for all memberships include:

- Membership Card
- Free regular admission to the museum and the Thomas-Foreman Home
- Special discounts to museum events
- Ten percent discount in the museum gift shop
- One-year subscription to The Historian
- Invitation to special exhibit previews

Membership Levels

- Individual \$25
- Family \$35
- Builder \$100
- Sponsor \$250
- Sustainer \$500



To complete a membership form and make payment visit the museum website at 3riversmuseum.com/membership

David N. Fink died on November 9, 1927, age 59 and was buried in Muskogee. His wife Lillian lived in Muskogee for many years and then moved to Arlington, Texas to be with family. She died there on January 30, 1957 and was brought back to Muskogee for burial beside her husband in Greenhill Cemetery. It is fitting that the Fink grave sits near the old route of the Jefferson Highway.

—Glenn Smith

Sociability Run Will Be Big Motor Event
David Fink Urges Local Autoists to Meet Jefferson Travelers on Run from Denison to Joplin to Attend Convention

One of the important events in motoring is the sociability run from Denison, Texas to Joplin, Missouri on July 4. This is in reality an endorsement of the tremendous effort that is being put forth to make the Jefferson Highway a success. On July 5 and 6 there will be a meeting of the International Jefferson Highway Association and those who make the run to Joplin will, if so disposed, also attend this meeting.

Dave Fink, who in a way is the father of the Jefferson Highway, wants all of the Muskogee motor car owners who can to meet the Denison crowd some where down the line and act as their escort through the county and on to Joplin if possible. The time when the Denison people will reach this county will be announced later. Mr. Fink wants you to join in if you can go no farther than from Oktaha to Wagoner.

It is runs of this character that go a long way to promoting better highway building and that have made such projects as the Jefferson Highway possible.

A few months ago there was an acquaintance run from Winnipeg to New Orleans, the full length of the Jefferson Highway, and in that run the official record shows that fully 4,000 automobiles participated. Mr. Fink states that the Jefferson Highway movement more than anything else has been responsible for Muskogee county having the best system of dirt roads of any county in the state. If you can join the run on July 4, even for only a few miles, get in touch with Mr. Fink at once and get the Muskogee representation organized. It is quite possible that the Muskogee Automobile Dealer's Association will give official recognition to this matter and if so, a very large number of cars in line is assured.

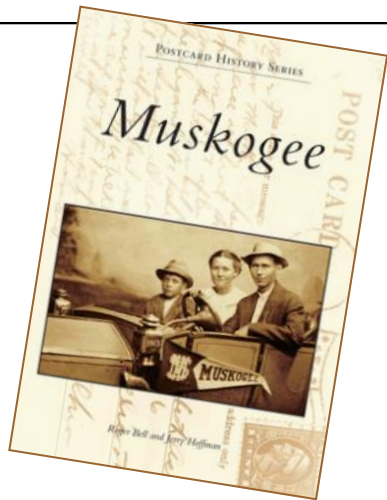
Muskogee Times-Democrat, June 15, 1918

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