RESOURCE PROTECTION PLANNING PROJECT

TRANSPORTATION IN OKLAHOMA TO 1920

REGION ONE

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TRANSPORTATION IN OKLAHOMA

Transportation has played a key role in the economic and social development of Oklahoma. Early on, a rudimentary transportation network had a great influence on the level of commercial activities by allowing an exchange of goods and information within the region and by providing a connection to markets in the South. Transportation also influenced the settlement of the region by both Indians and whites. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, improved mobility of goods, services, and people had far reaching social consequences. With faster links to the nation's cultural and political centers, the frontier disappeared and Oklahoma became fully integrated into the union. For purposes of this historic context, transportation in Oklahoma encompasses those facilities built to facilitate the movement of goods, services, and people. This includes sites and structures associated with river transportation, early roads and cattle trails, railways, and the state's highway system. This study covers the period from the beginning of the nineteenth century, when traders first used rivers in eastern Oklahoma, to the mid-1920s, when various levels of government began to fund construction of a modern highway system.

The development of transportation in Oklahoma occurred in distinct phases. The first took place prior to the introduction of railways and the second period began when railroads entered the territory in the 1870s. Before the

coming of the railroad, existing modes of transportation limited economic development. The movement of bulky items was restricted to waterways in eastern Oklahoma and to draft animals in overland travel. Each of these forms of transportation was slow and commercially unreliable. With the advent of railways in Oklahoma, large amounts of freight could be conveyed across the region faster and without regard for the depth of rivers or the needs of dray animals. The railroad revolutionized transportation in Oklahoma and had an unprecedented effect on the region by bringing in thousands of white settlers, contributing to the destruction of Indian sovereignty, and stimulating tremendous economic development.

One of the first examples of transportation's significance to trade in Oklahoma were waterways, and one of the earliest examples of these routes is the Three Forks region at the confluence of the Arkansas, Grand, and Verdigris Rivers. This site, active before 1820, was an important trading area with access to the Gulf of Mexico. Then, keelboats were the main means of river transportation, moving the region's products, mostly pelts, to New Orleans. These waterways also facilitated settlement, for Indian settlers used keelboats to reach Indian Territory over the same rivers as the traders who sent the region's products down river.

A later innovation in transportation permitted a greater volume of goods to move to and from Oklahoma. This involved the use of steam power, which also had an effect on the

region's agriculture. After removal to Indian Territory, some Indians, mostly intermarried whites and mixed-bloods, raised cash crops. Cotton, the main export crop, required a form of transportation that could move such a bulky item. Steamboats were the answer, and these craft plied the Mississippi and Oklahoma's eastern rivers to pick up these cargoes. The result was a great increase in the volume of goods exchanged, and the extension of the cotton culture to what would become Oklahoma.

While the waterways of eastern Oklahoma remained an important transportation network through the Civil War, overland trails persisted as the major means of moving foods and people. One of the earliest overland routes was the Santa Fe Trail, which passed through Oklahoma's panhandle. Its first regular use was in the early 1820s when Americans used the trail to trade between Saint Louis and the Mexican outpost of Santa Fe. Trade increased in volume and the trail continued to be used until the 1880s, when the railroad entered Santa Fe. Even so, the trail was not a factor in Oklahoma's commercial development; it simply passed through the region.

Beginning in the 1820s, forts linked by military roads formed an important part of the U. S. government's attempts to pacify the Indians living in what is now Oklahoma. The first of these roads, built in 1827, connected Fort Smith, Arkansas with Fort Gibson in the Three Forks region. Other

such roads traversed the region linking military posts scattered from Camp Supply, just east of the panhandle, to Fort Towson, in the southeastern part of the territory. Although generally of poor quality, these roads served as important overland routes until the coming of the railroads.

Roads also moved settlers across the region. The Texas Road, running north-south from Missouri to Texas, was among the first of these trails. First used in the 1820s by settlers who sought land in Texas, then a province of Mexico, the road later provided an avenue for Indian settlers travelling north to Indian Territory after their removal from the eastern United States. Later, it became an important route linking Texas, Indian Territory, and Kansas during the period of cattle drives from Texas to Kansas after the Civil War.

In 1849, the discovery of gold in California caused an exodus west. Southerners took the California Road that ran west from Fort Smith, Arkansas, through Indian Territory to the gold fields in California. In order to serve these travellers going to California, trading posts dotted the path. Apart from getting people to California, this well traveled trail helped settle Oklahoma.

One late addition to the forms of transportation available to people in Indian Territory was the Butterfield Overland Mail Route, a stage line that stretched from the Saint Louis to San Fransisco. Though the section of the

stage line crossing southeastern Indian Territory only lasted from 1858 to 1861, it was the first commercial route through the region, and also brought mail into the territory. Though the stage company abandoned the road in 1861, it continued to be maintained and after statehood became part of the state's road system.

Even before the Civil War there were cattle drives north through Oklahoma using the Texas Road. However, after the Civil War a glut of cattle in Texas and high prices for beef in Chicago caused more cattle trails to be blazed north from Texas to Baxter Springs, Missouri as well as Wichita and Dodge City, Kansas, where they would be shipped by rail to Chicago. The earliest of these trails was the Shawnee cattle trail. The eastern fork of the Shawnee Trail was the Texas Road, which went through eastern Oklahoma through Baxter Springs to Saint Louis, Missouri while the western fork of this trail turned northwest to reach Wichita. The most famous of these trails was the Chisholm Trail, which ran through central Oklahoma and split into two routes in Kingfisher County to take cattle to either Dodge City or Wichita. The Great Western Trail passed through western Oklahoma en route to Dodge City, once acclaimed the cow capital of the world. This period of great cattle drives only lasted about twenty years, and died out when rail connections pushed through Indian Territory to reach Texas. As a result, the cattle trails passing through Oklahoma lost

much of their traffic, but were still used as roads through Indian Territory and for local drives by the region's cattlemen.

The Reconstruction Treaties of 1866 forced the Five Civilized Tribes to permit railroads to cross Indian lands and in so doing precipitated a transportation revolution in Indian Territory. The most obvious change was an exponential increase in carrying capacity which altered agricultural practices by allowing more residents to raise cash crops. In addition, the railroads created towns such as Vinita, South McAlester, Ardmore, Ada, and Durant to manage their operations, and whites gravitated to these towns in unprecedented numbers. The Indians could not control this growth, which diluted their power and resulted in the destruction of Indian sovereignty. Once the Indians lost their self-government, Oklahoma and Indian Territories united as the state of Oklahoma in 1907.

After 1900, once the allotment of Indian lands was underway, towns like South McAlester could incorporate and achieve independence from Indian governments. This allowed towns to levy taxes and bonds, and in larger towns one of the early investments was for an interurban, also known as a traction company. These enterprises, financed by the towns and built by companies outside of the territory, ran trolleys both within towns and between a larger town and its suburbs. These companies in many ways resembled railroads, but their

significance was of a more local nature. Tractions were the first mass transit facilities in Oklahoma's towns and signified a certain level of urbanization. Connecting a larger town with the smaller townships surrounding it, interurbans were the beginning of commuter life as we know it today. These facilities increased the effective radius of goods, services, and people on a local level and helped to change the social life of towns.

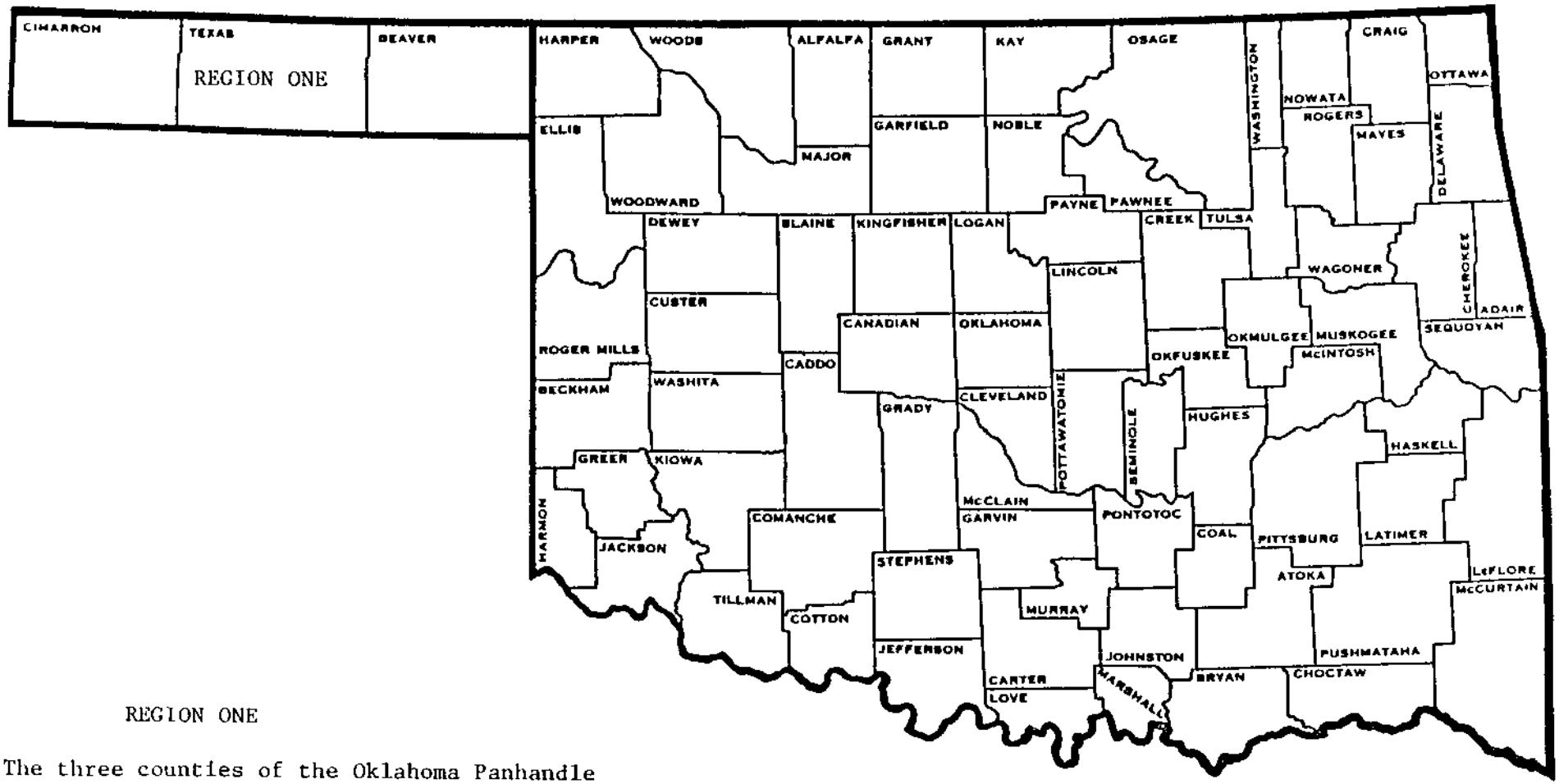
Concomitant with the advent of traction companies in the larger towns was the construction of section roads throughout what is now known as Oklahoma. In this instance, it was settlement that improved transportation and not vice versa. When Indian lands were allotted and Oklahoma Territory surveyed for settlement, blocks of land one mile on a side constituted the main land measurement, a section. Roads followed the section lines and small towns, usually little more than a post office and a general store, sprang up. The location of these small towns was significant, for they had to be spaced close enough to permit a farmer and his wagon to reach the town, conduct business, and get back to his farm in one day.

The state highway system provided the final embellishment to the developing transportation network in Oklahoma. The state highway system began in 1910 with the creation of a state agency to oversee roads in the state. However, by 1915 this office was still not directly responsible for any roads

in the state; it only served to police county activities. After World War I federal money became available for road construction and highway mileage increased dramatically. Such mobility meant that a rural resident had more immediate access to the goods and services in towns, and helped to bring about the end of many small towns whose existence was justified by the limits of animal powered vehicles. This sort of personal mobility also allowed the Okie exodus to take place during the Great Depression. On national scale, the spread of fast, personal means of transportaton would have an unimaginable impact on the social, cultural, and economic milieu of the nation. We are living with its effects today.

REGION ONE

Texas, Cimarron, and Beaver counties, which comprise Oklahoma's panhandle, are part of America's High Plains. This area of 5,760 square miles is a semi-arid grassland with few trees or streams. Rainfall in region one varies, from twenty-two inches on Beaver county's eastern border to less than sixteen inches in Cimarron county in the far West. With the one exception of Black Mesa in northwest Cimarron county, nearly all of region one is generally flat and featureless, watered only by Beaver Creek and the Cimarron River. In the nineteenth century, map makers included the panhandle in the Great American Desert, a label that helped retard settlement



REGION ONE

The three counties of the Oklahoma Panhandle

by whites until the late 1880s. The first inhabitants of the region were the Plains Indians who hunted buffalo on the prairie. By the 1870s, white hunters had destroyed the buffalo, the government had pacified the Indians, and cattlemen had claimed the grasslands as their own. The land these cattlemen moved into was called No Man's Land, because the region was not part of any state or territory.

Even before cattlemen came to No Man's Land, the Santa Fe trail passed through region one. First blazed in the 1750s by French traders who left Saint Louis to trade at Santa Fe, this path was little used due to Spain's restrictive economic policies that prohibited its colonies from trading with anyone but Spanish merchants. It was not until the 1820s, when Mexico gained independence from Spain, that the trail would be consistently used by traders going to Santa Fe. The Cimarron cutoff of the Santa Fe Trail was of importance to region one, for it split from the main path in southwest Kansas and passed through what is now Cimarron county en route to Santa Fe. This section of the trail, blazed to take advantage of the watering holes in No Man's Land, was a popular route that in turn attracted robbers and Indians who raided trading caravans on a regular basis. In response to this problem, the United States government established Fort Nichols in 1865. Situated near the western border of Cimarron county, Fort Nichols was active for only a few months but constituted the only white settlement in No

Man's Land until the arrival of the cattlemen in the late 1870s. The Santa Fe Trail itself remained a well traveled part of America's southwestern early road network until Santa Fe gained a rail connection in 1880. The trail's usefulness did not end though, for it continued to be of importance to local traffic.

In the late 1870s, cattlemen helped open up the panhandle by establishing trails to drive their herds north to markets in Kansas. Beginning in Booker, Texas, the Jones-Plummer Cattle Trail ran through what is now Beaver county and ended in Dodge City, Kansas, then the cattle capital of the world. An early tradesman in region one, Jim Lane, established a store in Beaver county to serve cattlemen. Situated at the junction of the trail and the Beaver River, Lane's store later formed the nucleus of Beaver City, at one time the capital of Cimarron Territory before No Man's Land was incorporated into Oklahoma through the Organic Act of 1890.

Though the Santa Fe and Jones-Plummer Trails were the most famous of the early trails passing through No Man's Land, other routes assisted in the movement of goods and people across the region. Most of these trails more or less followed the Jones-Plummer Trail going to Dodge City. The Fort Bascom-Fort Dodge military road connected two military posts, one in New Mexico and the other in Kansas. The road left Fort Bascom, New Mexico, entered Texas county at its

southeast corner, passed through Beaver City, and proceeded north to Fort Dodge. Another route, the Adobe Walls Trail, connected Texas and Kansas, but unlike other early roads passed west of Beaver City.

Prior to the advent of rail traffic in region one, these trails constituted the transportation network of the Panhandle. Cowboys regularly used the trails to get their cattle to Dodge City, and traders drove their wagons over these same trails to supply the cattlemen's needs. Settlers who arrived in the early 1880s also used these trails, which amounted to huge ruts as much as one hundred feet across and three feet deep. By the mid-1880s, cattlemen had lost most of their herds to devastating blizzards and settlement in southwestern Kansas neared the saturation point. Many new arrivals to southwestern Kansas saw the recently vacated lands of the panhandle as an attractive place to homestead and used cattle trails as routes into the region.

At first the homesteaders in the panhandle were subsistence farmers, but many later switched to commercial farming, which had a lasting impact on the region. Wheat became the predominant cash crop, due largely to the construction of railroads. These rails connected farmers in the Panhandle to national markets, and in so doing significantly altered the economic character of the region. Wheat growing in region one increased in response to better transportation, and farmers turned more prairie sod to make way for additional

wheat fields. However, wheat impoverished the soil, and was a poor ground cover. With the disappearance of the sod that held the loose soil of the Panhandle together, the land became susceptible to erosion. In the 1930s, these factors combined to form the Dustbowl, an area of devastation caused by windstorms that stripped away the exposed soil and carried it as far away as the Atlantic Ocean.

The first rail through the Panhandle was the Rock Island, which crossed Texas county in 1902. Like the Santa Fe trail it was initially a means to get through the area but unlike the older route it spawned a number of settlements that later became towns. This was a phenomenon that was consistent with rail construction and management throughout Oklahoma. The railroad, needing depots and supply points, either built a town for that purpose or adapted a town to its use.

Those small towns that were initially constructed to supply the railroad's needs, like Hooker in Texas county, eventually became settlements in their own right. Other communities that lacked a rail connection suffered as they were bypassed in favor of the railroad towns. Beaver City was a case in point. It had been the capital of Cimarron Territory, but after the Rock Island completed a line through Guymon, Beaver City's importance waned significantly while the population of Guymon swelled. Other pre-statehood towns, such as Alpine and Meridian, simply ceased to exist after the

railroad passed them by.

The railroads were able to build towns and influence agricultural practices largely because they brought great masses of people to settle the new land. The cyclical weather of region one and settlement patterns in Oklahoma also influenced the numbers who homesteaded the Public Land Strip, but the Panhandle's period of great population growth was not coincidental to the establishment of rail services. In 1900, prior to railroad construction through the Panhandle, the whole of region one contained only 3,051 people. By statehood, that figure had increased to over 35,000 residents. Though favorable weather and the nearly complete settlement of the rest of the state might have made the Panhandle more attractive after 1902, people still had to get there. It was the railroad that provided this link that allowed region one's population to increase ten fold in five years.

Besides the Rock Island Railroad, three other rail lines served the Panhandle and its wheat farmers. They were the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas railroad, also known as the Katy, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe, and the Beaver Valley and Northwestern railroad, later known as the Beaver, Meade, and Englewood. The construction of the Santa Fe line through region one is largely indicative of what a railroad could do for a sparsely settled region, particularly with respect to town development. In 1925, prior to the completion of the

Santa Fe line through the panhandle, Boise City in Texas county had a population of only 350. That same year the Santa Fe finished laying track through Boise City, and in five years, the population nearly quadrupled to 1,256. The Katy, itself a pioneering railroad in Indian Territory, was a late comer that entered region one through the purchase of an existing stretch of track, The Beaver, Meade, and Englewood.

The Beaver, Meade, and Englewood was a particularly interesting rail line because it demonstrated just what lengths people would go to in order to secure a railroad through their town. In the early 1900s people in Beaver county desired a rail connection and tried to attract railroads to their town, but the companies were not interested. Undaunted, the citizens of Beaver City attempted to construct a line of their own, but the plan failed. However, with the financial backing of Kansas businessmen and the donated labor and materials from the town's citizens Beaver City eventually gained its railroad. It comprised a one hundred mile stretch of rails that linked Beaver to Keys and Hooker, providing a connection with the Panhandle's wheat belt. This short line, known as the Beaver, Meade, and Englewood, was immediately profitable, and was later sold to the Katy for two million dollars.

When compared to the rest of the state, roads and highways came late to region one. A partial explanation rests with the geography of the region, which permitted

animal drawn vehicles to move easily across the plains. Another factor involved the livlihood of most residents, which was wheat farming or cattle raising. The success of these occupations did not necessarily depend on good highways, so long as there was a rail connection. This situation began to change in the 1920s with the construction of highway eleven west through region one. Though the road was graded earth except for a short gravel section outside of Guymon, it provided an alternative to the railroad for the movement of goods and people. With the construction of this road, the Panhandle possessed most of the same transportation links as other areas of the state.

Writers have often portrayed the Panhandle as a desolate area that was barely habitable by humans. While the terrain might have challenged early settlers, by statehood what was once called No Man's Land enjoyed the same overland ties with the rest of the nation that any other area of Oklahoma had. Transportation fostered commercial farming in the region, which was in turn a factor in the creation of the Dust Bowl. No longer isolated, farmers became sensitive to national market trends and became a part of the nation's agricultural community. They had access to the same news as everybody else and could buy what anyone else could buy. In short, they lost their isolated character and became like anyone else in Oklahoma.

PROPERTY TYPE ANALYSIS FOR TRANSPORTATION SITES IN REGION ONE

There are very few identified transportation sites in region one. In the period under study, the Panhandle was isolated from most significant transportation routes, was settled later than much of the rest of Oklahoma, and supported a comparatively sparse population. Regardless, field survey work should reveal more sites pertinent to transportation in this region. Research completed to date indicates that the following property types would probably still be extant: trails and roads, river crossings, railroad depots and other railroad structures, bridges, and pre-1920 automobile related buildings. The National Register criteria will be the basis for evaluating all identified properties. National Register criteria are as follows:

A: Properties that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

B: Properties that are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

C: Properties that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

D: Properties that have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

1. Trails and roads: Cattle trails, military roads, and civilian trails in region one are generally distinguished by the ruts they have left on the prairie. Cattle trails such as the Jones-Plummer trail will be the most obvious, since the cattle herds left a path in the prairie as much as three feet deep and one hundred yards wide. Ruts left by wagons will best be located where the wagons forded streams, for the wheels left great scars in the banks.

2. River crossings: These sites are likely to be found in conjunction with the roads and trails of region one. A river crossing used by cattle and wagons will appear as a greatly eroded section of streambank on both sides of the stream. If a known trail or road passed through the area this eroded section of the streambanks is most likely a stream crossing for that trail. Fortunately, the rivers and streams in region one have not been dammed and channelized to the same degree as was the case in other parts of Oklahoma, which should promote the preservation of these crossings.

3. Railroad depots and other railroad structures: Previous research has located only a few depots in region one. The reason for this is simple: region one did not have a population sufficient to merit many depots and ancillary railroad buildings. To date, the only railroad buildings known to exist in region one are the depots at Gate, in Beaver county, and the Keyes depot in Cimarron county. These structures, located along a section of track unless like the

Gate depot they have been moved, were generally built from a single floor plan that was made larger or smaller to accommodate the depot's traffic. These buildings are rectangular in shape with a hipped roof supported by outrigger brackets. Exterior walls were brick on the lower half with stucco above. Also, builders frequently employed copper sheeting to decorate the depots. Finally, there was also a freight dock at one end of the depot. Given the number of towns served by railroads in region one and the generally uniform appearance of the depots, further structures should be located with more careful research.

4. Bridges: Though no bridges have been located as of yet in this research of region one, they were features of railroads and highways to cross streams and ravines. There are no common features of these bridges due to the fact that their appearance depended on the length of the span, the load it was expected to bear, and the nature of the terrain the bridge was supposed to cross. Research in courthouses will be the best approach in locating and dating such structures.

5. Pre-1920 automobile-related buildings: Prior to the 1920s, crude roads spanned region one. Previous research has not found any early-day garages, stations, or lodging facilities. Owners' tastes generally determined the design of such structures, which makes a generalization of their appearance impossible. However, structures of this sort may still survive, but their existence is best determined by

courthouse research followed up by a visit to the site.

TRANSPORTATION SITES IN OKLAHOMA

REGION ONE:

Beaver County:

1. Gate Depot: Block 24, lots 8-12, Gate, OK (Oklahoma Landmarks Inventory)
2. Old Comanche Trail: Sec. 4, T 5 N, R 28 E; 5 miles north of Gate, OK (OLI)
3. Hawkaday Roadway: SE 1/4 Sec. 5, T 34 N, R 28 W, (OLI)
4. Sharps Creek Crossing: 5 miles SE of Turpin, OK (N.R.)
5. Jones and Plummer Trail traces: Beaver City, OK

Cimarron County:

6. Signature Rock (Santa Fe Trail): Cold Springs Arroyo, vicinity of Kenton, OK
7. Santa Fe Trail trace: NW 1/4 SW 1/4, T 4 N, R 4 E, (OLI)
8. Santa Fe Depot: Sec. 13, T 4 N, R 7 E; Keyes, OK (OLI)
9. Autograph Rock: E 1/2 NE 1/4 Sec. 8, T 5 N, R 4 E, (OLI)

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