

# ODOT 100

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of Transportation in Oklahoma

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## Celebrating the First 100 Years of Transportation in Oklahoma

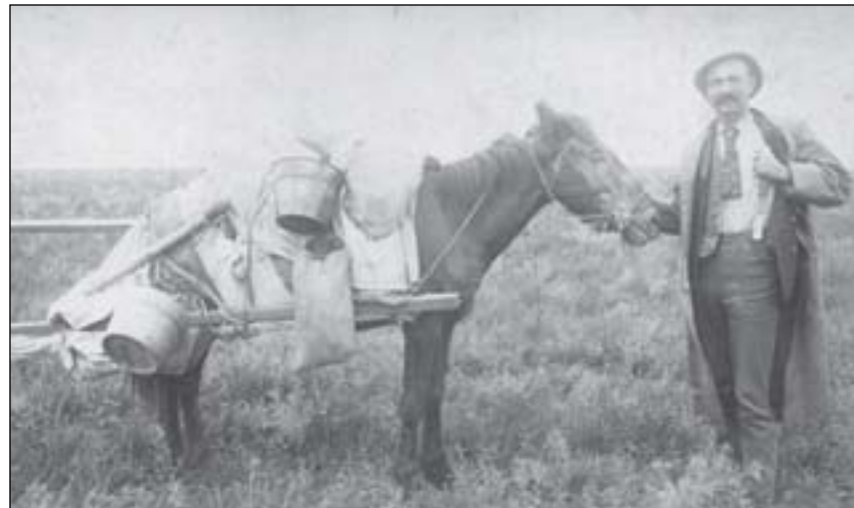
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## CHAPTER ONE



# The Need for and the Creation of a Road System

As residents of Oklahoma and Indian territories feverishly sought admission to the Union in the late nineteenth century, they were concerned about the poor state of roads. Even before Henry Ford's invention of the "horseless carriage," heavy use of ancient trails, especially in rural parts of what would become Oklahoma, had made transportation between towns difficult and sometimes impossible during the rainy season.



The first Oklahomans established routes to food and trade on waterways, on foot, or by horseback following lines of least resistance or old animal tracks. When the United States Army and cattlemen entered the region, the military road from Fort Smith to Fort Gibson that had been constructed in 1826, was the first surveyed road in the future Oklahoma.

In the next two decades, military roads became the principle routes in eastern Oklahoma as the Native Americans were removed from their ancestral homes in the southeastern United States to Indian Territory. After the Civil War, cattle trails, such as the Chisholm Trail and the Great Western Trail, and overland routes, including the Texas Road and the California Road, became important for travel. Despite efforts to provide major routes between major towns, most residents of the Twin Territories still battled washouts, flooded streams, and a severe lack of dependable roads from their homes to nearby cities and towns.

The call for better roads in early Oklahoma came primarily from farmers who needed to move their harvested crops to market and business leaders of rural towns whose future depended upon both producers and customers being able to drive to town. The territorial governments and the Indian tribes did not have resources to maintain any system of decent roads, so able-bodied men from townships, 36-square-mile political subdivisions, built and maintained section-line roads. The skill of citizen road crews directly affected the quality of roads in every county.

Some Oklahomans formed local organizations to promote their towns and counties. Recognizing the importance of good roads to stimulate economic development, A.C. Titus, a fruit grower from Crescent, Oklahoma spearheaded the organization of the Sand Valley Good Roads Association in 1902 to promote Logan County and improve travel to



Early transportation for Oklahoma's settlers was trying and difficult. Mud just exasperated the problem.



Sidney Suggs from Ardmore was selected by Governor Lee Cruce as the first Oklahoma State Highway Commissioner in 1911.

Sidney Suggs and his family lived in the Ardmore area and ran the Ardmore newspaper. Elected president of the Oklahoma-Indian Territory Good Roads Association, he supported the creation of a state highway department.



Beaver, Oklahoma in 1910 shows the presence of automobiles and the need for more roads.

Guthrie and surrounding communities. Much of the impetus for good road associations came from springtime flooding in Oklahoma Territory in 1902 that washed out bridges and decimated dirt roads.

The railroad companies were in support of better roads for the practical reason that farmers could get their crops to railroad spurs for shipping to distant markets. Good road associations convinced several territorial railroads to sponsor “good roads trains.” Influential speakers and highway engineers accompanied railroad cars loaded with highway building equipment to rural Oklahoma towns. Often, as a demonstration and to build public support for better roads, a section of an existing highway was reworked within days.

Fred Barde, the Oklahoma correspondent for the *Kansas City Star*, was an outspoken advocate for improved highways. He used newspaper articles to argue that good roads would double the value of rural property and improve the ability of farmers to get their goods to market. He also advocated the establishment of a government agency to oversee the construction of highways. He, along with many other civic and government leaders, believed that the “overseer” system in townships could not meet the demands for highways in the twentieth century.

Ardmore newspaper publisher Sidney Suggs played a pivotal role in pushing for good roads. He formed one of the earliest good roads associations in Indian Territory. He was elected president of the Oklahoma-Indian Territory Good Roads Association in 1906 and urged members of the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention to create a state highway department. The lobbying effort of Suggs and others was successful. Article XVI of the Oklahoma constitution provides:

The Legislature is directed to establish a Department of Highways, and shall have the power to create improvement districts and

provide for building and maintaining public roads, and may provide for the utilization of convict and punitive labor thereon.

However, after Oklahoma was admitted as the 46th state on November 16, 1907, the legislature had other pressing business and did not follow the direction of the constitution to establish a Department of Highways. Instead, early state leaders had to use good roads associations to begin the massive job of improving roads in Oklahoma and developing local economies.

The first successful road improvement project came in 1908 near Watonga in Blaine County. Two main roads leading into the town were virtually impassable during harvest. The federal Office of Public Roads provided an engineer who surveyed the route and oversaw farmers and township officers in laying a sand-clay roadway, a standard road surface at the time. The local Commercial Club raised money to buy a rock crusher to provide stone for the road surface.

The Oklahoma Good Roads Association was lauded by state officials for spearheading the project. Other towns, such as Cordell and Lawton, soon built new roads and repaired old thoroughfares to improve access to their communities. In Cordell, Governor Charles Haskell approved the use of convict labor to help in the road project. The scope of the Cordell project was to connect Washita County with Oklahoma City. In July, 1910, the first convicts, 50 men from the state penitentiary at McAlester, arrived at Cordell and were housed in a road camp.

The Oklahoma legislature recognized in 1911 that a formal state agency was necessary to direct development and maintain state roads. There was vigorous debate of how to finance the department with a new tax—either 25 cents per horsepower or a \$1 for a state license fee. The license fee idea won, although the new law establishing the



Oklahoma Governor Lee Cruce, who served from 1911 to 1915, signed into law House Bill 318 to create the state highway department in 1911.

department, House Bill 318, contained no appropriation to operate the department until license fees could accumulate, nor did the legislation contain a mandate for construction and maintenance of roads.

The 1911 legislation also established the office of State Highway Commissioner to be appointed by the governor for a four-year term with an annual salary of \$2,500. Sidney Suggs, the Ardmore newspaper publisher who had supported good roads and the development of a state highway department for years, was appointed by Governor Lee Cruce. Suggs had left the operation of his newspaper to others and traveled the state speaking on behalf of good roads and lobbying state legislators to create the highway department. Just one year earlier, he served as an unpaid inspector of public roads, appointed to the position by Governor Charles Haskell. With no salary or state expense account, Suggs nevertheless was able to talk to many local officials to inventory the need for road improvements.

The State Highway Department was fully staffed by December 10, 1912, with Suggs as commissioner, assistant commissioner Clark Hudson, highway engineer W.P. Goit, and Walter S. Gilbert, secretary. Suggs and his skeleton staff announced its duty was to launch an aggressive educational campaign, to secure the work of 500 prisoners to grade and drain dirt roads within five years, and to assist the counties in building permanent bridges and culverts.

As the new Highway Commissioner, Suggs had good intentions. However, he had little money to work with. A large number of Oklahoma vehicle owners, perhaps as much as 60 percent, refused to pay the \$1 per vehicle tax. There was no organized system of collecting the tax, no central list of vehicle owners, and no effective enforcement effort to punish vehicle owners who did not pay. With no state-appropriated funds and a small amount of tax revenue coming in,

Suggs could only dream of developing a plan for improving the state's highways. Suggs announced a plan for six major roads:

- Main Line No. 1—state line north of Newkirk through Ponca City, Perry, Guthrie, Oklahoma City, Norman, Pauls Valley, Sulphur, and Ardmore;
- Main Line No. 2—extending east and west across the state through Muskogee, Okmulgee, Okemah, Oklahoma City, El Reno, and Weatherford to the Texas line;
- Main Line No. 3—along the old Chisholm Trail, from Caldwell, Kansas, through Medford, Enid, El Reno, Chickasha, Duncan, and Waurika to the Red River;
- Main Line No. 4—the Mid-Continent Highway from Caney, Kansas, through Bartlesville, Tulsa, Sapulpa, Okmulgee, Holdenville, Calvin, Coalgate, and Atoka;
- Main Line No. 5—from the state line north of Miami through Vinita, Pryor, Wagoner, Muskogee, Checotah, Eufaula, McAlester, Atoka, and Durant to the Red River;
- Main Line No. 6—from the Kansas line through Beaver, Buffalo, Woodward, Taloga, Clinton, Cordell, Hobart, Snyder, Frederick, and Grandfield to the Red River.

During the first 18 months of operation, Suggs did not collect enough money to fully pay his small staff and he received only a small percentage of his statutory salary.

One of Suggs' ideas of a system to collect the vehicle license tax has endured into Oklahoma's second century. He implemented a plan in which local citizens collected the \$1 tax and kept a portion as a fee before sending the balance to the state. That system became the Oklahoma tag agency system.



Sidney Suggs was appointed by Governor Lee Cruce as the first State Highway Commissioner.



Like Sidney Suggs, Governor Lee Cruce was from Ardmore and knew of Suggs and his work to improve roads in Oklahoma.

Suggs was successful in coordinating construction of the Oklahoma portion of the Meridian Road, a north-south route that ran from Canada to Galveston, Texas. Suggs often spent his own money for travel expenses to meet with local leaders who were charged with constructing segments of the road. The highway department often provided an engineer to survey portions of the road in some counties that did not have a county engineer. The nearly-300-mile highway entered Oklahoma at the Chilocco Indian School in Kay County and stretched south to Colbert, in Bryan County, following roughly the path of present-day US-77.

Suggs and others realized that the antiquated system of local control of road projects would never work in a modern era. State Senator Elmer Thomas led the legislative fight in 1915 to pass sweeping legislation to reorganize the State Highway Department. The new law authorized the Highway Commissioner to establish standard construction and maintenance guidelines, to provide engineering services for local units of government, and to work closely with the federal government. Counties were ordered to designate no less than ten percent of the roads as state highways.

The intent was for roads to connect major towns within the counties and to link those towns from other parts of the state. The legislature this time, created a central fund for road improvement projects and allocated a portion of the ad valorem property tax to finance road construction. The bill became law on March 15, 1915 and established fines and penalties that were assessed to automobile owners who did not pay the license fee. Prior to this, the state did not have the ability to enforce the required fee structure. The legislature also provided for fines and penalties for failing to obey the law. For the first time, vehicle owners were required to buy and attach a metal license plate to the rear of cars and trucks. The title of the State Highway



Sidney Suggs, left, and the Highway Commission Secretary Walter Gilbert, seated next to Suggs, toured the state promoting better roads.

**Did You Know?** The first license plate fee was established at one dollar per year in 1911.