

THC HERITAGE TOURISM HISTORIC BANKHEAD HIGHWAY INITIATIVE

Program Outcomes: Mount Vernon, Weatherford, and Big Spring

Discussions of Bankhead Highway heritage tourism products in the three pilot cities vacillated between ideas that were particular to each city and ideas that could spread along the Bankhead route to other cities. Other discussions revolved around ideas for products that could be accessed by visitors year-round versus event-type activities that are seasonal and might contribute to an eventual Bankhead Days event. Each of the pilot cities decided to address all these parameters with their product selections. Each city decided to develop an outdoor photo panel program (History-Mystery panels) using historic imagery with a question that visually challenges viewers to compare the historic with the city scene of today. Two of the cities decided to develop videos that would use oral histories to bring a human dimension to Bankhead recollections. All three of the communities decided to develop annual festivals to celebrate their Bankhead histories, and as part of this celebration, they all three are including classic car rallies, and two of them are including live actors dramatizing their histories. These projects are described below.

Related Bankhead heritage projects are also being spawned in these communities. Several painted Bankhead murals are being planned for blank exterior walls (in Big Spring and Mount Vernon), several history museums are planning either permanent or recurring temporary exhibits about the Bankhead (in Big Spring and Weatherford).

DRIVE! (Mount Vernon)

DRIVE! is Mount Vernon's annual Bankhead Film Competition and Festival. The name references the main purpose of the Bankhead, which was driving motorized vehicles across the U.S. It also references Mount Vernon's theme for its Bankhead heritage tourism program: Driving Change, which is what the highway did in this community. And finally, it is a reference to the longhorn cattle drive along the Bankhead, which is a planned event during this annual festival.

DRIVE! is a multi-day event taking place in multiple venues downtown, along or near the Bankhead corridor, including the Franklin County Arts Alliance, the Teague Chevrolet building, Smoky Row (nickname for a section of downtown just off the highway), Franklin County Courthouse Square, and Mount Vernon Music. It culminates a film competition and includes the screening of finalists' work as well as loosely-related Bankhead-themed feature films and regionally produced art films. Different festival events are geared to various audiences including both families from the city and region and filmmakers from around the state.

The festival accepts short film submissions from filmmakers around (Texas, the U.S., the world) that highlight the importance of transportation (and more specifically the Bankhead Highway) for the exchange of people, goods, services, and ideas. Judges are selected regionally and include professionals in the industry. Prizes may include: a) money, b) a seminar taught by an expert in filmmaking, c) an internship opportunity to shadow such a professional at work, or c) gear or other donated prizes.

Other related DRIVE-ing the Bankhead events include a Classic Car Rally surrounding the Franklin County Courthouse Square, a longhorn cattle drive along the Bankhead Highway during the festival is planned for the future, activities for kids and families, and the cooperation of downtown merchants and restaurants to be open during the event.

Driving Change: Interpretive History-Mystery panels (Mount Vernon)

The concept behind the History-Mystery panels is a statewide idea that will hopefully be adopted by other cities along the highway. The idea is to adorn Bankhead buildings (particularly unoccupied ones

or those with blind walls) with Bankhead interpretation and historic photographic murals. The panels offer visitors a glimpse into the past that allows them to see the town in which they stand as it was nearly 100 years ago. An archival photograph, usually culled from the local history museum, library, or an historical reference book, is enlarged and then superimposed with a short description of an interesting element in the photo. The "mystery" portion of this exhibit encourages the viewer to get involved by asking an intriguing question about the photograph or the buildings depicted in it, then comparing it to the contemporary scene. The idea is to get visitors looking, thinking, and talking to discover something new for themselves.

Using thematic interpretation and photographs from the Franklin County Historical Association's archives, Mount Vernon's local historians and graphic talent are collaborating to create interpretive murals on Bankhead and related Mount Vernon downtown history. These enliven empty storefronts (such as Lowry Furniture) and develop Bankhead history for local residents and visitors alike, illuminating through interpretation how this history matters.

Video Memoirs (Mount Vernon)

Video memoirs are an audio-visual extension of the history-mystery panels. They allow viewers to see the town through an historian's eyes via a smart phone, iPad, or similar device. In essence, they provide storytelling in the digital age. Videos incorporate oral histories of featured building owners or their descendants, recalling memories of life and business along the Bankhead Highway, as it passed through Mount Vernon. These brief histories also leverage Franklin County Historical Association's photographic archives that can be woven into the video imagery. The videos will be posted online by the Franklin County Historical Association for visitors to view on their mobile devices or on their home computers.

Stray Days (Weatherford)

This is a revived heritage festival for the whole family. An open-air farmers market brings back the meeting-in-the-square of producers and consumers. Each quadrant of the Parker County Courthouse square represents a different decade in Bankhead Highway history. The "dress rehearsal" June 6, 2016 includes food and craft vendors, downtown businesses, actors in period costumes giving performances related to Bankhead Highway history in Weatherford, period music, a classic car rally and cruise, horse-drawn carriage rides, Billy the Bull (courtesy of the Championship Bull Riding Assoc.), and several businesses converting into Speakeasies for the period event (Sweet Springs Winery and Twisted Snifter). Over time it may grow to include: live bands, dance performances, outdoor films, games, a cutting horse presence, and other heritage events and offerings. The first full-fledged festival will take place September 23–24, 2016.

Bankhead Classic Car Rally and Cruise (Weatherford)

Leveraging the interest of car enthusiasts and the historical tie between classic cars and the Bankhead Highway, this cruise begins as a car rally in the Parker County courthouse square on Friday night of the Stray Days celebration. Owners are on hand to talk to visitors about their beautiful, historic machines. Car Clubs may provide opportunities for visitors to ride in the classic automobiles as a revenue generating activity. On Saturday morning, the cars file out of the square and circle the courthouse in a short procession as they embark on a cruise along the Bankhead Highway to Mineral Wells or other surrounding Bankhead towns. This offering brings into focus the quintessential experience of driving the Bankhead Highway, and it highlights Weatherford's unique asset of having the longest stretch left in Texas of historically signed Bankhead Highway, whose pastoral views provides motorists a glimpse of what it was like to drive the Bankhead across Texas in the early-mid 20th century.

The Classic Car Rally and Cruise complement Weatherford's recently opened Vintage Grill and Car

Museum. This establishment is located in a historic gas station on the Bankhead Highway one block east of the courthouse square—a Bankhead tourism asset available year-round to Weatherford visitors and residents.

Drama on the Square (Weatherford)

As a contribution to Weatherford’s interpretation of Bankhead Highway heritage and to the organization of Stray Days, members of the local theatrical community are developing skits that bring this history to life. Continuing the organization of the quadrants of the courthouse square by decade (during the heyday of the Bankhead), they are developing skits for each epoch, which will be acted on a stage set in each quad. Two actors perform on each stage. Period music (for each decade presented) enlivens the spaces of the quads between acts. The actors expand their interpretation of the period through casual contact with the audience. The backdrops for the sets are historic photo panels that will be used as “History-Mystery” panels in the historic downtown core that visitors can view and interact with throughout the rest of the year.

Interpretive History-Mystery panels (Weatherford)

Using thematic interpretation and photographs from the Doss Heritage and Cultural Center archives, local historians and graphic talent collaborate to create interpretive murals on the Bankhead Highway topic and related Weatherford downtown history. These enliven empty storefronts and develop Bankhead history for local residents and visitors alike, illuminating through interpretation how this history matters to them. Adding a layer of interactivity, they challenge viewers to look closely at the photos and the surrounding landscape, learning from changes they see and sharpening their skills for reading the Bankhead landscape. To check their answers and learn more about Weatherford and Bankhead Highway history, the panels direct viewers to the Doss Heritage and Cultural Center, where a Bankhead Highway display is exhibited during Stray Days.

Summers on the Green (Big Spring)

Summers on the Green is an outdoor event series that reflects Big Spring’s opulent star-studded past, which is tied to its location on the Bankhead Highway. This heritage tourism offering brings tourists and residents downtown along the Bankhead Highway to a rich roster of different cultural events and performances on the lawn east of the Hotel Settles. These events also prepare the city for the rebirth of the 1932 Municipal Auditorium, which will provide a complementary, indoor venue once reopened.

Types of performances anticipated include:

- Film screenings (Highway-culture-related (e.g., “Cars”); local stories (e.g., “Midnight Cowboy”); Bankhead stories (e.g., “Lifeboat” with Tallulah Bankhead)
- Video Memoirs screenings (see below)
- Theater, including Howard College Theater Department
- Music, including local bands and choruses
- Symphony (showcasing period music)

Live Theatrical Bankhead Interpretation (Big Spring)

Adding a live theatrical element to Big Spring’s Summers on the Green events—and in preparation for staging larger theatrical performances in future years’ events—Howard College Director of Theatre, Nathan Jacobs, is getting his students involved in Bankhead interpretation. For the 2015 season, four of his students committed to perform at every event. Being all women, they researched female characters from Big Spring history who were tied in some way to the Bankhead Highway. These included Ethel Trotter, reputedly one of the first working women of Big Spring who knew cars inside and out and worked at an Walker Auto Parts store along the Bankhead, and Jean Porter, a home-grown movie star who, during her high school years, would take the bus along the Bankhead Highway from Big Spring to Fort Worth for weekend acting classes. Each character has a supporting actress so

that they perform in teams. Working with area historians, they studied their characters and prepared to be “in character” during the evening festivities. Their roles are to educate the public in Big Spring and Bankhead history and to serve as greeters during the events, mingling with the audience.

Bankhead Video Memoirs (Big Spring)

Short videos developed by Big Spring’s famous radio personality, Tumbleweed Smith, that portray local stories related to Big Spring on the Bankhead Highway, or old-timers reminiscing about the Bankhead Highway. These brief histories leverage Tumbleweed Smith’s decades of video and audio interviews as well as some of the Heritage Museum’s considerable photographic archives that can be woven into the video imagery. These compelling videos are screened before feature films and other performances at Summers on the Green, on the city’s YouTube channel, on a mobile app, local TV and radio, and an exhibit at the museum.

Interpretive History-Mystery Panels (Big Spring)

Using thematic interpretation and enlargements of photographs from the Heritage Museum archives, local historians and graphic talent have collaborated to create interpretive murals on Bankhead and related Big Spring downtown history. These enliven empty storefronts and develop Bankhead history for local residents and visitors alike, illuminating through interpretation how this history matters to them. Adding a layer of interactivity, they challenge viewers to look closely at the photos and the surrounding landscape, learning from changes they see and sharpening their skills for reading the Bankhead landscape. To check their answers and learn more about Big Spring and Bankhead Highway history, the panels direct viewers to the Heritage Museum, where a permanent Bankhead Highway display, supported by Alon, is located.