

# Highway patrol reduced crime, boosted safety

ONLY IN OKLAHOMA

By GENE CURTIS

Oklahoma didn't need a state police force in its early days — each county had a sheriff and deputies to enforce the law, and the larger cities had their police forces.

There were few cars, and the state's primitive highways discouraged speeding.

But that need changed in the late 1920s and early 1930s with the advent of better roads, a growing highway fatality toll and faster cars used by bank robbers and other criminals who could commit a crime and flee into another county where a pursuing sheriff had no jurisdiction.

The number of cars on the highways had increased from about 6,500 in 1912 to more than 600,000 by 1929 and the traffic fatality toll had grown to about 500 per year in the late 1920s.

It was an era that spawned big-name criminals such as Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, George "Machine Gun" Kelly, the Barker family, Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd and others who took advantage of the antiquated police setup.

"In a few months of 1933-34, a series of criminal activities in the

state shocked many citizens to the realization that rampant crime had indeed arrived in Oklahoma," Bob Blackburn wrote in the *Chronicles of Oklahoma* in 1978.

"Oklahoma had become a criminal haven in much the same fashion as it was in its days as the territories. The odds were stacked in the favor of the machine gun-toting, fast-driving outlaws of the '30s," the Oklahoma Highway Patrol's history page on the Internet points out. And there was no state police agency to protect the state's citizens.

The Oklahoma Constitution had provided for the election of a sheriff in each county, but most of the sheriffs had no law enforcement experience or education; they were just good old boys who were popular enough in their counties to win elections.

Most sheriffs had two or three deputies, but they also lacked training and experience. One of the deputies in each county usually served as the jailer, leaving only two or three officers to enforce the law. In addition, they had to spend much of their time



serving various writs for the courts and taking defendants to court.

Attempts to create a state police agency in 1929 and 1935 failed in the Legislature because of opposition from county commissioners and other groups that feared a state agency would usurp the powers of local law agencies.

But Oklahomans were concerned, particularly about the growing fatality toll. The first highway patrol was created in June 1935 with 12 officers in six cars, but the officers had little or no authority. They were supervised by highway safety director J. M. "Bud" Gentry of Enid. Half of the patrol members worked for the Highway Commission and half for the State Tax Commission.

Gentry said the officers were to maintain a constant patrol of state roads for law enforcement



An Oklahoma Highway Patrol car cruises the Turner Turnpike.

Courtesy Oklahoma Turnpike Authority

and to assist motorists.

Within a year, the small force had made 1,000 arrests and issued 500 warnings in an attempt to force motorists to obey traffic laws, proving the value of a state patrol. But the road toll continued to climb and soared to 684 in 1936, with 20,000 more seriously injured in accidents.

Finally, the 1937 Legislature approved a law creating the Oklahoma Highway Patrol and establishing a driver's license. After a three-week training school at the University of Okla-

homa, 83 men began patrolling Oklahoma's highways on July 15. They were joined by 42 more troopers a few weeks later after a second training school.

The pay was \$125 per month and the troopers hit the roads in black and white Fords and motorcycles. Headquarters was a borrowed house trailer that was moved from place to place, depending on where troopers were working.

The patrol cars had no radios for more than a year, and then the officers had to buy their

own; even with radios, they frequently couldn't make contact with headquarters without driving to the top of a hill. The patrol cars had no heaters, forcing the troopers to use their ingenuity to remain warm during cold, winter patrols. Some stretched old Army blankets between the dashboards and seats of their cars with holes cut for their heads. Some used kerosene lanterns and others used gasoline heaters and at least a couple set their cars on fire.

The patrol proved its value within the first year. The 1936 toll of 684 and 1937 highway death toll of 639 had been cut to 518 a year later.

Since that time, the OHP has been used for many purposes — to quell riots at the penitentiary and other places, investigate crimes, search for bank robbers and kidnappers, arrest felons and assist local officers — in addition to the OHP's basic mission of traffic control.

Illustration research by Rachelle Vaughan.

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## Bus discount passes offered

Offering discounts at dozens of area businesses, new EZ Rider bus passes will go on sale Monday at local QuikTrip locations and Tuesday at Tulsa bus stations.

A \$3 EZ Rider Day Pass will provide unlimited rides for a day and give access to discounts and special rates at par-

ticipating restaurants, sporting events, entertainment venues and retail stores. Some discounts would more than make up for the \$3 bus pass, officials said.

For a list of participating businesses, go online to [www.tulsatransit.org](http://www.tulsatransit.org).

## ROAD WORK

► Traffic is limited to one lane in each direction on the 21st Street Bridge over the Arkansas River for bridge repair, which is expected to take six weeks. As part of the project, the ramp to southbound Riverside Drive will be closed until Wednesday.

► The northbound curb lane on Delaware Avenue from Third Street to Fourth Place will be closed for three weeks for waterline installation.

► The eastbound curb lane of Pine Street from Lewis to Peoria avenues will be closed until April for waterline construction.

► Traffic is narrowed to one lane in each direction on Third Street at Boston Avenue for street improve-

ments, sidewalk enhancements and conversion to two-way traffic on Boston Avenue between Third and 10th streets. Completion is scheduled for August 2007.

► Street maintenance on Pine Street at Garnett Road continues and is scheduled for completion in March.

► The interchange at Interstate 44 and Yale Avenue is scheduled for completion in March, with lane closures possible when necessary.

► Elgin Avenue between John Hope Franklin Boulevard (Haskell Street) and Interstate 244 is closed to through traffic through December 2007 during construction of a new building at OSU-Tulsa. Traffic will be detoured onto Greenwood Avenue.

## Heritage Association to get new home

► A May opening is planned for the Oklahoma City museum.



The Oklahoma Heritage Association will open a new museum this spring in its new home at the Mid-Continent Life Insurance Building.

A. CUERVO/Tulsa World file

### WORLD CAPITOL BUREAU

OKLAHOMA CITY — The Oklahoma Heritage Association is planning a May debut of its new multimillion-dollar museum in Oklahoma City.

The museum is part of the association's new home in the Mid-Continent Life Insurance Building, which has undergone five years of renovations and refurbishment.

The museum will include high-tech interactive exhibits, using plasma TVs, touch-screens and holographic technology to illustrate Oklahoma's history. "The Heritage Association has been around for 80 years," said Erin Page, a spokeswoman for the group. "We focus on telling Oklahoma history through its people."

The museum will show the individuality, perseverance, pioneer spirit, optimism and generosity of Oklahomans, she said.

"We're telling the history of Oklahoma through the accomplishments of Oklahomans," Page said.

A partnership with Northern Lights productions, a national film and video production company, will provide holographic exhibits.

"We want people to really feel like they are in the exhibit," Page said.

The heritage association also works to publish books by Oklahomans or about the state, offers scholarships and also oversees the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. An exhibit featuring Oklahomans inducted to the Hall of Fame is also planned.

Funding for the museum included \$3 million donations from both oil businessman Boone Pickens and Edward L. Gaylord, the late Oklahoma Publishing Co. chairman. The Heritage Association was formerly housed in Oklahoma City's Heifer Mansion. The new facility is set to open May 10.

For more information, go online to [www.oklahomaheritage.com](http://www.oklahomaheritage.com) or call (888) 501-2059.

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