

Photo of the Month

Highway 71



Touring along Highway 71 near Bella Vista, c. mid-1960s Post Card
Negative # 22878

The 1950s and 1960s are often popularly characterized as decades of the “good life” for the large and prosperous American middle class following World War II. Automobile travel, for example, grew in affordability and convenience as family incomes rose, consumer prices declined, and national road networks improved. Road trips on scenic highways became part of many people’s experiences. Highway 71, through Benton County, was touted as one such route and is pictured at right. A postcard, circa 1960, described the route near Bella Vista as framed by “beautiful overhanging bluffs” as well as an “excursion into the legendary Ozarks...” and a trip that “will be long remembered by your family.”

While always scenic in nature, the conditions of this route did not always offer comfort or speed to the traveler. Early in the development of Northwest Arkansas, the route appeared as essentially a winding, unimproved country road, which eventually grew from gravel surfaces to sections of paving largely accomplished through convict labor. Benton County’s section of Highway 71 is part of a national route created in 1926 that stretches from Louisiana to the Canadian border. As part of establishing Highway 71, it became aligned with several existing routes, such as Highways 102, 72, and 59.

The highway opened between Bentonville and Rogers for the first time in 1930 and became the focus of contracts, employment, and federal funds for paving projects in the area. Paving continued throughout the 1930s and the route was widened in the 1950s as the nation addressed the need for road improvements to support economic, recreational, and defense needs. By 1960, Highway 71 was again rerouted at Bentonville on Highway 100 to Missouri.

For many years, the highway's importance to the area rivaled the economic significance of the Frisco rail line. It was often described as the "main corridor" for residents, businesses, and vacationers, which brought not only resources to the area, but also our communities much closer together. Travel became safer, faster, and easier for that time period. However, the heavy use of the road and criticism of the winding route's safety through the Boston Mountains eventually contributed to the establishment of Interstate 540, which today runs roughly parallel with Highway 71. For a trip down memory lane, Highway 71 is always a good choice.