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Automobiles take over roadways a century ago



By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

In the early twentieth century, a transportation revolution was underway: automobiles were becoming commonplace on the roads.

In 1903, a Hot Springs man drove to Arkadelphia “on his automobile,” and by 1910, about twenty-five Arkadelphians owned cars.

However, a complete transition to the more modern mode of travel took time. For a number of years, horses, wagons, pedestrians, and cars, all occupied streets. With the presence of such wide variety of vehicles, many issues arose as they all began to share the streets and drivers wrestled with new rules of the road.

Early on, motorized vehicles were quite a novelty. When a local citizen bought a car, news of the purchase often made the local newspaper, and even driving was considered newsworthy. Long-distance travel was very special.

For example, in 1913, an out-of-state car received attention in the local newspaper: “An automobile bearing California license No. 43979 passed through Arkadelphia en route from California to North Carolina.”

New regulations became necessary to maintain safety and order, so in 1909, the Arkadelphia City Council set a speed limit for automobiles inside the city limits at ten miles per hour. A year later the Council reduced that limit to eight miles per hour and specified that motor vehicles have a horn or whistle, with drivers to “blow or whistle at the distance of at least 100 feet from each street crossing and continue to blow or whistle until the crossing is past.” Then, in 1916, the Council passed ordinances requiring driving on the right side of the street and for drivers to hold out a hand to show direction when turning a corner. It was forbidden to “make turns except at crossings.”

Even by 1918, drivers continued to share the roads with a variety of animals. During World War I, foodstuffs were placed at great value. So, when collisions occurred and killed animals, the “joy riders” were viewed as unpatriotic.

The May 9, 1918, edition of Arkadelphia’s Southern

Standard gave this report: “Complaints are coming in of the killing of hogs over the country by reckless automobile drivers and there ought to be a stop put to such senseless and unnecessary destruction of this much needed food product. There is absolutely no use of running over the hogs and other live stock in the roads and anyone who knows of fellows who are killing the stock is neglecting a patriotic duty in not reporting their names. This is no time to waste meat to the reckless pleasure of joy riders.

Bob Green living on the Bethlehem road over in Manchester says that he has had three of his hogs killed recently by automobiles, and the fellows who killed the last one, a fine brood sow, was seen to stop his car down the road and take off the license tag of his car in order to prevent detection. The killing of the stock must be stopped, that’s all.”

For additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum (www.clark-countyhistory.org) or (870) 230-1360 or the Clark County Historical Association’s Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives) or (870) 245-5332).



Pictured above is a road near Arkadelphia around 1918. Shown below is a 1915 license plate. IMAGES COURTESY OF THE CLARK COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

