

RED DIRT RAMBLING

By BILL DRAGOO | Photography By JAMES PRATT

Along Oklahoma's segment of the Trans-America Trail, roads less traveled make all the difference in adventure.

IT WAS ONE man's dream to connect the East to the West—not via rail or interstate but by dirt. In this age of superhighways and pavement, wouldn't it be refreshing to drive across the United States without the whine of tires on asphalt? What if a map and GPS route led down shady, unpaved lanes, over the few remaining steel truss bridges, and through the tallgrass prairies of this vast land?

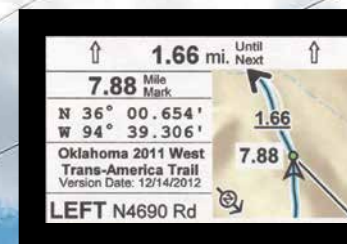
In 1995, that man, Sam Correro, finished the route he had worked on in stages since 1984. An adventure motorcyclist from Corinth, Mississippi, Correro decided to string together and ride some 4,800 miles of back roads and call them the Trans-America Trail, or TAT. While mainstream travelers choose to see the USA via roadways like Route 66, the TAT is for more intrepid souls.

The route crosses 674 miles of Oklahoma, mostly in the far northern portion, on its way from eastern Tennessee to Port Orford, Oregon. Although designed for street-legal, off-road-capable motorcycles, Oklahoma's segment—which we'll call the Trans-Oklahoma Trail, or TOKT for short—also is accessible by automobile.

In Oklahoma, the trail generally follows county roads. Most are smooth, well-graded dirt or gravel. Some offer more of a challenge, making a high-clearance vehicle advisable if not essential. Wet weather can turn the route into a mudfest in spots.

The Boy Scout motto—"Be prepared"—is a good mantra for those traveling the Trans-Oklahoma Trail. This is not the interstate.

Travelers will encounter a number of water crossings along the Trans-Oklahoma Trail, including this one near Westville. Inset, roll charts, used by motorcyclists to map road trips, indicate the locations of the photographs that accompany this travelogue.





↑	0.79 mi.	Until Next	↑
31.21	Mile Mark	↻	31.21
N 36° 01.795'			
W 94° 54.227'			
Oklahoma 2011 West Trans-America Trail			
Version Date: 12/14/2012			
RIGHT - E0690			



↑	3.17 mi.	Until Next	↑
18.11	Mile Mark	↻	18.11
N 36° 01.738'			
W 94° 45.165'			
Oklahoma 2011 West Trans-America Trail			
Version Date: 12/14/2012			
RIGHT D4635 Rd			

WE MISS OUR turn in Westville, distracted by the old buildings in this onetime railroad town near the Oklahoma/Arkansas border. Paradoxically, Westville marks the eastern portal of the Trans-Oklahoma Trail. It's a happy accident, I think, as a pair of longhorns and a whitewashed skull mounted atop a front door catch my eye. I wheel our pickup to the curb and urge my wife Susan to snap a few shots of the building's statehood-era architecture. Our friend and photographer James Pratt arrives to join our impromptu photo session.

An older Toyota pickup pulls up behind ours, and a tall, white-haired gentleman unfolds from the cab. Smiling, he greets us with a handshake and

Left, vintage structures like this trestle bridge near Lake Hulah dot the Trans-Oklahoma Trail. Above, the forest in eastern Oklahoma near Scrapper forms a scenic backdrop for adventures.

an invitation to look around. Friendly and open, Bud Rose leads the way through the Buffington Hotel, which he calls his "bachelor pad." He offers us a seat, pointing us toward chairs loosely arranged around a cast-iron stove.

"Don't mind the cans," Bud says as we stroll past an open box of canned food on the floor. "That's my pantry. I don't have many guests, so I didn't clean up."

Bud is happy to show us through his home, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984. He lives on the first floor; the upstairs rooms are occupied only by birds and ghosts. Dusty walnut trim still surrounds transom-topped doorways, and a few old steel beds remain in various states of decay.

Folks like Bud who live along the route don't see a lot of outsiders. The TOKT brings welcome newcomers to these rural communities and provides a unique opportunity to enjoy the state's roads less traveled and sites less cele-

brated. Some buildings house old-timers like Bud, others only memories.

As we duck into the woods outside Westville, the last vestiges of redbud trees sprinkle the forest. Lush new foliage covers oak, hickory, ash, and bois d'arc. Pure white flowering dogwoods chime in to create a magnificent display over the Ozark Plateau. The occasional dilapidated farmhouse stands askew among twisted vines and overgrown trees, losing its battle with gravity and the elements.

These buildings won't be around much longer, and their humble design probably never will be seen again in these hills, roamed not so long ago by Native Americans. Each homestead tells a story of struggle and joy where families lived, worked, and died.

We splash through sparkling streams at a number of low water crossings. A roadrunner tests our reflexes, darting in front of our truck and reminding us how infrequently motor vehicles pass

through the area. Bluebirds flit across the pasture by the roadside, entertaining us with their antics.

Just eighteen miles in on the trail, near Turkey Hollow, we come across Clear Fork Church, with its low stone wall and perfectly preserved playground equipment from the past century. I resist the urge to try out the giant sheet metal slide, but Susan has a go at the merry-go-round. We find the two-holer outhouse still in perfect working order.

The trail is dark and shady as we approach the Illinois River north of Tahlequah, with limestone bluffs hanging to our left and polished chrome waters glistening to our right. Glimpses of the river become more frequent as our route parallels the waterway for a mile or two before crossing it on an old green steel bridge. Nearby outfitters such as Sparrow Hawk Camp and War Eagle Resort offer guided fishing, canoe trips, camping, and cabins—but the day is young, and we have far to go.

Just before crossing the Neosho River, we roll into Salina, one of Oklahoma's earliest permanent Euro-American settlements. In 1796, French Creole fur trader and explorer

Jean Pierre Chouteau established the first trading post here for business with the Osage. Salina, from the French word *sel* (meaning "salt" in English) was named for the nearby salt springs. We spot a rusted cast-iron kettle in a city park, a remnant of a nearly forgotten era when salt was obtained by boiling water from these springs in large kettles. We have an easier time finding salt for our burgers at the Dairy Deal downtown on Ferry Street.

Northwest of Salina, the hills give way to prairie. It's not unusual to see the occasional llama or alpaca guarding livestock against predators, but a few single-humped surprises greet us as we pass Windsong Adventures, a hunting lodge northeast of Adair. Camels graze lazily nearby and venture close as we stop and approach the fence. I share my Nutter Butters and make a friend for life. James gets a green spit bath from a llama. He should have offered cookies.

While it's no trouble to find lodging along most parts of the Trans-Oklahoma Trail, some prefer camping. Osage Hills State Park near Pawhuska offers 23 primitive tent sites, 20 RV sites, and natural beauty.



The TOKT skirts the northeastern edge of Oologah Lake, then enters Bartlesville at mile 155. Bartlesville boasts several motels and the Inn at Price Tower, Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic skyscraper. This would be a good stopping point for the first night, but the prevalence of good camping is more inviting.

We continue on and pitch our tents at Osage Hills State Park. Park ranger Kyle Thoreson and park manager Nick Conner share information on the Cross Timbers and the history of the park, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. We enjoy brief glimpses of the meticulous stonemasonry in the park's bridges, culverts, and shelters before moving on.

ON OUR SECOND day, near mile 170, the trail strikes Hulah Wildlife Management Area near Pawhuska, which has wetlands more akin to Florida than Oklahoma. A 1938 WPA bridge recalls a time when dirt roads were the norm and dust poured in through windows open to the midday heat. Hulah Lake and the 16,000-acre Wildlife Management Area, administered by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, are home to wild turkey, dove, quail, rabbit, squirrel, and bobcat and offer primitive camping—no showers, toilets, or picnic tables.

Life goes by at a slower pace for the people who make their homes in these parts. We stop and chat with brothers Terry and Larry Hurst as they string fence on their land, which is just three hundred feet from the Kansas border.

Near the Caney River in Osage County, the road twists and turns, and we keep a slow pace so we won't miss the relics hidden among the underbrush. We spy what looks like an old Sears, Roebuck, and Co. house standing defiantly against the elements, its fences and gates losing the battle to weather and rot. Behind it is a rusting 1930s Chevrolet hay truck, now home to snakes and rodents. Another outhouse

Map Quest

Ready to hit the Trans-Oklahoma Trail? First come the maps, and they're only available from the TOKT's founder.

It is unlikely anyone could successfully navigate the Trans-Oklahoma Trail without proper maps. There are sixteen for Oklahoma alone and volumes for the entire United States route. Although a capable traveler could manage most of the trail in a sturdy sedan, a four-wheel-drive vehicle or dual-sport-capable motorcycle is preferable. All trail maps, roll charts, and GPS tracks are proprietary; order them from Sam Corroero at transamtrail.com/store. \$24 to \$372.

Turn-by-turn roll charts like this one clamp onto motorcycle handlebars, allowing riders to safely check their course.



dates the demise of this place, its last inhabitants moving out before plumbing moved indoors.

The tallgrass prairie of Osage County seems to spring up from nowhere, opening our view from the few feet between curves to vast acres crossing miles of rolling, grass-covered hills. The nearby Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, managed by the Oklahoma Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, is the largest preserved tract of native tallgrasses on earth.

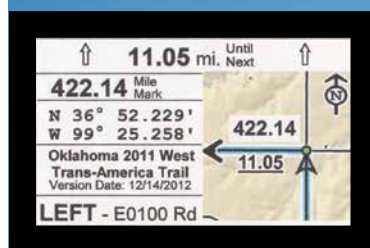
There is no bad season to cross this prairie: The green fields of spring eventually turn yellow and finally fade before winter. Archaeological discoveries over the years mark the locations of ancient Indian villages throughout Osage County. It is easy to imagine a young Kaw, Osage, or Pawnee trapping game, knapping flint arrowheads, or carving a bow by the side of a stream.

Camping is easy to come by around Kaw Lake, just east of Ponca City, but it's too early for us to put down stakes. We stop at Stagecoach Barbeque in Newkirk to enjoy ribs and smoked chicken while the boys at G&B Auto repair a punctured tire on James' vehicle. They're accustomed to these kinds of tasks, since the motorcyclists traveling the TAT stop here occasionally for repairs.

The roads straighten out west of I-35, and our scene takes on the familiar look of western Oklahoma. Fields of yellow-crowned canola lie to the north, and deep green, knee-high wheat unfolds to the south. Even the dirt changes color, from tan to the red soil so famous for dyeing rivers and farm ponds the color of rust.

Camping is scarce in these parts except for a local RV park, but Alva has several motels. We choose one to regroup and freshen up.

NOW THREE DAYS and 400 miles into our 674-mile journey, what began as a lark feels like a test of endurance. We rumble along mile after mile of straight, dusty roads. The varied scenery and winding roads of



The Trans-Oklahoma trail takes travelers through varied terrain, from the overflowing rivers and forest canopies of eastern Oklahoma to endless horizons and waving wheat fields like this one west of Alva.



DRIVE, CALL, OR CLICK

HOW TO FIND THE PLACES
ALONG THE TRAIL

Sparrow Hawk Camp, Tahlequah

21985 North Ben George Road
(918) 456-8371
or sparrowhawkcamp.com

War Eagle Resort, Tahlequah

13020 State Highway 10
(918) 456-6272
or wareagleresort.com

Dairy Deal, Salina

211 Ferry Street
(918) 434-5326

Windsong Adventures, northeast of Adair

(918) 864-0055
or windsongadventures.com

Inn at Price Tower, Bartlesville

510 South Dewey Avenue
(918) 336-1000 or pricetower.org

Osage Hills State Park, Pawhuska

2131 Osage Hills Park Road
(918) 336-4141
or TravelOK.com/parks

Hulah Wildlife Management Area, north of Pawhuska

(918) 349-2281
or wildlifedepartment.com

Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, north of Pawhuska

(918) 287-4803 or nature.org

Kaw Lake, east of Ponca City

(580) 762-9494 or kawlake.com

Stagecoach Barbeque, Newkirk

400 West South Street
(580) 362-3160
or stagecoach-barbeque.com

Black Mesa State Park, near Kenton

(580) 426-2222 or
TravelOK.com/parks

eastern Oklahoma are behind us, and the long, flat trail ahead seems to stretch into infinity. Crisscrossed debris barriers that look like train trestles skirt the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River and break the monotony. Cows stand knee-deep in the slow-moving waters.

The road forks just past the river, one leg paved and one dirt. We turn right on dirt, staying true to the route. Gypsum hills and copper streak the valleys with chalk and green sediment layers. Beyond Alva, the land becomes even more western—not John Ford movie western but a landscape of tumbleweeds rolling across the sandy prairie, driven by unfettered winds.

Sage and yucca replace tilled farmlands. Dust devils hundreds of feet high spin wildly. It is a raw brand of beauty but beauty nonetheless. Egrets pose in the rare shallow pond like debutantes at a cotillion ball. The red dirt has ended, and white dust leaves a patina on our dashboard and shoes.

An undulating dirt road northwest of Alva leads to a modest house with a few outbuildings. We have unknowingly landed in Lookout. Sandy Wimmer comes out to greet us, and another history lesson unfolds. She tells us nearby Lookout Mountain was the vantage point from which settlers would spot sites for their future homesteads. Sandy's mother was postmaster in Lookout from 1946 until 1972, and her house is the original post office.

Her barn is full of relics, old tools, and implements of an earlier time. Sandy likes the old things, and a touch of sadness comes over her as she talks about the few buildings slowly returning to dust near Lookout.

"When people retire and move or pass away and the kids don't want to stay out there, the house dies," she says.

So we have seen in the remnants by the roadside. The TOKT gives travelers a chance to experience what is left of these old buildings. If we take the time, we can learn something of what it must have been like when they were filled with life.

Near mile 545, we hit deep sand, and two ruts through the sage are our only indication of the route. Brad Stevens, who lives in the lone red brick house at the east end of the sand trap, has rescued many a motorcyclist who walked to his house begging for help to right a fallen mount.

"A Florida rider broke his leg in this spot a few years ago," he says, "and I put his bike up in the barn until he could come back and finish his trip the following year."

There are a lot of TAT-friendly folks along the route, some of whom put up signs and ask visitors to stop by and sign their guest books.

We see pronghorn and rabbits everywhere as we near the end of the TOKT. At Black Mesa State Park, we set up camp and enjoy a hot shower. A cloudless sky presents some of the most brilliant stars on earth, with the dark surroundings uninterrupted by city lights. Amateur astronomers bring their telescopes here and often are eager to share the view. We enjoy a quiet night, with the welcome exception of a nearby camper's fiddle strains of "Faded Love" floating down South Carrizo Creek.

AFTER A GOOD night's sleep, we hike up Black Mesa, the highest point in Oklahoma at 4,973 feet, and enjoy the view as a reward for the past few days' effort. There we find a cache with mementos—business cards, Monopoly tokens, a kite folded and tucked away in a handcrafted box—left by previous visitors to this lonely and beautiful place. Dinosaur tracks and arrowheads remain in the area, as do other artifacts of those who have gone before.

A trip like this is off the radar for many, but as John Steinbeck said in *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*, "A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike.... We do not take a trip; a trip takes us." We are indeed taken by the diminishing pearls of the past and the progress of our generation, all seen along the Trans-Oklahoma Trail. 🐾

The Trans-Oklahoma Trail incorporates segments of the Santa Fe Trail's Cimarron Route—like this one near the Oklahoma-New Mexico border—and other off-the-beaten-path historic sites in western Oklahoma.