

Editor: Tim Potter
District Engineer: Brent Terstriep

A treasure hunt for Kansas highway history

Cover story

By Tim Potter

Near the Barber/Harper County line, John Wiens crunched over gritty soil and through dried weed stalks so he could reach the treasure.

There, along an old country road, the Kansas Department of Transportation employee found a solid hunk of history -- a monument of sorts to our road-building past.

What he recently located is a 97-year-old triangle-shaped concrete post with this embossed on a metal plaque: "Kansas Federal Aid Project No. 209 Section A 1923."

It was fitting that the KDOT Engineering Technician Senior could record the marker. He serves as the District Five archivist. Wiens is the person who keeps District Five's older highway plans, stored in the Hutchinson office. Some of the plans date back a century, when gravel and brick-paved country roads served as highways.

To Wiens and a group of Kansas highway and road engineers, his discovery out in the weeds was an important



John Wiens poses, amidst the weed stalks, with one of the old highway markers – dated 1923 – that he found at the Barber/Harper County line, south of U.S. 160. Brent Terstriep/Photo

find. It is part of an effort to document some of the state's oldest roadways built with government dollars. To them, the road posts aren't just dots on a map. They are a tangible trace of how the state's transportation network has evolved.

Finding the markers has become a friendly treasure hunt and competition that includes semi-serious bets waging steak dinners. At the same time, it

has been a professional endeavor to document some of the state's oldest highways before time erases their history.

From 1919 to 1929, workers set in concrete posts – to mark the starting points and end points of highway projects. During that decade, the State Highway Commission funneled federal money to counties to build state highways. In 1929, the State Highway Commission took over construction and maintenance of state highways and stopped marking the project limits.

It's not clear how many posts were erected, but Norm Bowers has documented 46 of them so far that are still standing out there, including some recent finds by Wiens.

For a few years now, Bowers, Local Road Engineer for the Kansas Association of Counties, has kept a spreadsheet on where the markers are located. In alphabetical order, the post locations go from Allen to Wilson counties. Geographically, they stretch from Bourbon and Cherokee counties in the southeast to Barton and Pawnee counties in the central west, from Doniphan County in the northeast to Barber County in the southwest.

According to Bowers, the farthest northwest marker is in Mitchell County, and the farthest west marker is one Wiens found at the Pawnee-Edwards County line.

And those are just the ones found and recorded so far.

Since 2018, Bowers has been asking county employees to help spot the posts.

Many of the surviving posts sit along roads that have long since been bypassed by newer alignments.

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A close-up of the Barber/Harper County concrete post with a metal plaque dated 1923. Brent Terstriep/Photo

Safety Award 2019 recipients



The District Five Office staff received a 2019 safety award, and new KDOT shirts for the award. Front row, from left: David Menefee, Technology Support Consultant II; John Wiens, Engineering Technician Senior; Beth Lee, District Receptionist; Melissa Poe, District Accountant; Dave Bohnenblust, District Maintenance Engineer; Lisa Zrubek, Human Resource Professional I; Paul Thomas, District Safety Specialist. Back row, from left: Tim Potter, Public Affairs Manager; John Gatz, District Construction Mentor; Barry Santee, Engineering Technician Specialist; Bryan Hamel, District Staff Engineer; Dwight Radke, District Administrative Officer; Brent Terstriep, District Engineer.



On Jan. 10, District Engineer Brent Terstriep and District Maintenance Engineer Dave Bohnenblust presented the KDOT jackets to employees at the shop in Anthony. The award recognizes the shop's safety record and dedication and attention to safety. From left: Brent Terstriep, District Engineer; Paul Thomas, District Safety Specialist; Greg Hekel, Anthony Sub Area Supervisor; Dan Blanchat, Equipment Operator Senior; Paul Thompson, Equipment Operator Senior; Brian Evans, Equipment Operator; Mike Yoder, Equipment Operator Specialist; Gene Wedman, Equipment Operator Senior; Dave Bohnenblust, District Maintenance Engineer.

NEWS FROM SOUTH-CENTRAL KANSAS

Published monthly by
District Five Office
500 N. Hendricks
Hutchinson, Kansas 67501

Brent Terstriep
District 5 Engineer
(620) 663-3361
Brent.Terstriep@ks.gov

Tim Potter
Public Affairs Manager
(620) 663-3361
Tim.Potter@ks.gov

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“Most of the markers were removed when highways were later widened,” Bowers wrote on an information sheet asking for help to find the markers. But in some cases, like along a railroad, the highway was widened only on one side, so a marker could remain along a current state highway, he noted.

“If the highway was relocated, the markers may now be located on county roads that were state highways in the 1920s,” he explained. “County lines and at the edge of cities are the most common locations.” Some markers can be found on gravel roads that were improvements from rutted dirt roads.

Asked how many markers were originally erected and how many might have survived highway expansion and relocation, Bowers laughed and said, “That’s what we’re trying to find out.”

The Sunflower State markers are unusual, if not unique. From his limited research, he said, “I’ve never been able to find any other states that have them.”

Along with Bowers, KDOT’S Mike Stringer has taken an interest in the markers. Stringer is Chief, Bureau of Local Projects. He has been encouraging KDOT employees to locate the posts -- “so we can preserve them for posterity.” To prod the effort, the two men began offering steak dinners -- from their own money, Stringer stresses -- for whoever could find the western-most post. And for Stringer, it doesn’t necessarily have to be the western-most post to earn a steak dinner.

According to Brent Terstriep, District Engineer in District Five, Wiens should get a steak for his find at the Pawnee/Edwards County line.

“Now,” Stringer quipped, “the list of people I would like to buy a steak dinner for has gotten so long that it might take a while.

He then put it this way: “Our commitment is still to provide a steak dinner ... just can’t commit to when.”

Terstriep couldn’t resist the fun of a bet – and the lure of tracking history. During work travel in their south-central Kansas district, he and Wiens detected one of the markers along an old sand and gravel road just south of U.S. 160 near the Harper/Barber County line. That’s the 1923 marker Wiens posed by after stepping through the winter-killed weeds.

Wiens pointed to a map showing that the old road where he found the marker has a series of sharp turns. The current highway just to the north is an arrow-straight stretch. “I would assume that they were trying to straighten out these curves” for safety, he said, pointing to the map.

Plans show that the marker was part of a federal aid project that extended a little over 6 miles at a cost of \$44,631.37 – 97 years ago.

Some of the original specs call for the posts to be 3 and half feet down into the ground, with 2 and a half feet above ground.

Most recently, while riding with a co-worker to check on the progress of a project, Wiens found two more markers – one west of the Pawnee County town of Garfield on U.S. 56 and another farther southwest on the same highway, at the Pawnee/Edwards County line.



Wiens with a now-leaning 1922 marker he found along U.S. 56 near Garfield. John Gatz/Photo

Both markers are dated 1922. Although originally placed in 1922, the markers were relocated some unknown distance along U.S. 56 in 1936.

“I’ve been up and down that road quite a bit, and I’ve never seen any of those markers” before he began looking for them, Wiens said.

Wiens and Terstriep have both learned from their limited study of the markers that in some cases the roadways built under the federal aid program 90 to 100 years ago were constructed to connect segments of roads that had originally served as trails for frontier settlers’ westward migration.

“A lot of our (highway) routes were along these old trails,” Wiens said.

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Treasure hunt

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Terstriep found out, for example, that another marker located by Wiens was for the 15th federal aid project in Kansas. It paved an 18-foot brick road for 17.7 miles: from Hutchinson, through Nickerson to the Rice County line. The project was called the “New Santa Fe Trail Cut-Off Road.” It connected the “New Santa Fe Trail” to the “Old Santa Fe Trail.”

Where there had been ruts through the prairie mud in the mid-1800s, professionally designed roadways were being built by the time the 1919 federal aid program began.

In an email, Terstriep told Bowers and Stringer that the road projects served their purpose – “to get us out of the mud. Our counties deserve a great deal of credit.”

Earlier, Terstriep and Wiens had seen one of federal aid plaques mounted along with other highway memorabilia at one of the District Five buildings. So during their work travels, “people were kind of keeping an eye for them,” Wiens said.

Years back, Wiens found another of the markers – still in the ground – along a Hutchinson street.

“I think it’s good to rehash old highways because we kind of forget where we came from,” he said. Some were built with the help of load-bearing animals, not sophisticated earth-moving equipment.

“This is the beginning of our highway system,” Wiens said. “I don’t think people realize that our roadways are 100 years old, shortly after the horse and buggy.”

To him, the concrete posts were meant to convey a message to the 1920s motoring public: “I think they (government officials) wanted to show the public that the money was being spent on the roadways.”

The part-time hunt for markers will continue, Wiens said. “I think there’s still more out there we haven’t found yet.” ■



Wiens with what is thought to be the western-most marker located so far – along U.S. 56 at the Pawnee-Edwards County line. The marker is dated 1922. John Gatz/Photo

EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

District Five employee profile, January 2020

Name: Dan Blanchat

Job title: Equipment Operator Senior with Anthony Sub Area Shop.

What does your job involve? Operating all kinds of equipment and being ready to respond to all kinds of weather and emergencies.

What do you like about your job? So many things, including helping out with paint and bridge crews. Being around the crews, he says, makes him feel “like a kid at Christmastime.” If he had to pick one favorite task, it might be “running a dozer.” That’s because seeing the “before” and “after” of the work gives him such a sense of accomplishment.



Dan Blanchat has been with KDOT for almost 41 years. He is an Equipment Operator Senior with Anthony Sub Area Shop. Tim Potter/Photo

How long have you been with KDOT? Almost 41 years – long enough that he got to shake hands with Gov. Laura Kelly for his 40th service anniversary. About 10 to 15 years into his KDOT service, he promised his supervisor at the time – Leroy Walker – that he would stay 40 years so he could meet the governor.

What do you like to do when you are not working? “I enjoy helping friends and neighbors out. I enjoy being around my cows. I’m still involved in farming, too, on evenings and weekends.” That includes helping his brother with corn and soybean harvest.

Where did you grow up? On a farm near the Harper County town of Danville. “You blink, you’ll miss it.”

What is your hometown now? Danville

Favorite food? “My mom’s home-cooking from the Sixties. Just a good old-fashioned home meal.”

Favorite music? Sixties and Seventies rock ‘n’ roll. ■

To all District Five employees: Please submit suggestions for District Five employee profiles for this newsletter to tim.potter@ks.gov. Thanks!

District Five's most valued resource: the employees

Promotions

Area 1

Congratulations to: Tristan Younkman, Equipment Operator Specialist, Pratt Sub Area.

Area 3

Congratulations to: Layton Corley, Equipment Operator, Wellington.

Area 4

Congratulations to: Kenneth Roach, Equipment Operator Senior, Great Bend Sub Area.

New employees

District

Welcome to: Jacquelynn Miller, Administrative Specialist, District Human Resources; Jess Loret, Facilities Specialist; District.

Area 1

Welcome to: Jason Dobrinski, Equipment Operator Trainee, Greensburg; Shawn LaPlante, Equipment Operator Trainee, Kingman.

Area 2

Welcome to: Jacob Conner, Equipment Operator Trainee, Hutchinson Sub Area; Joshua Cousins, Equipment Operator Trainee, El Dorado Area Crew; Daniel McLean, Equipment Operator Trainee, Hutchinson Sub Area.

Area 3

Welcome to: Richard Miller, Equipment Operator Trainee, Winfield.

Area 4

Welcome to: Joseph Clarke, Equipment Operator Trainee, Larned; Katlin Coulliette, Engineering Technician Associate, Great Bend Construction.

Area 5

Welcome to: Josef Pichinte, Equipment Operator Trainee, Wichita East; Jason Stadalman, Equipment Operator, Wichita East; Isaac Gomez, Equipment Operator Trainee, Wichita North; Jared Krueger, Equipment Operator Trainee, Wichita North; Brian Summers, Equipment Operator Trainee, Wichita West; Jason Thiessen, Equipment Operator Trainee, Wichita East.

Retirements

District

Congratulations to: John Stewart, Equipment Shop Supervisor, District.

Area 1

Congratulations to: Raymond McIntosh, Engineering Technician, Pratt Construction.

Area 4

Congratulations to: Bradley Halseth, Highway Maintenance Superintendent, Great Bend; Michael Kinzel, Equipment Operator Specialist, Great Bend Sub Area.

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Valued resource

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Service anniversaries

Celebrating 40 years: David Wiggins, Equipment Operator Senior, El Dorado.

Celebrating 35 years: Clinton Weyrauch, Equipment Operator Senior, El Dorado.

Celebrating 30 years: Samuel Wingert, Engineering Technician Specialist, Wichita.

Celebrating 25 years: Charles Thimesch, Equipment Operator Senior, Pratt.

Celebrating 20 years: Sheila Ward, Equipment Operator, El Dorado; Paul Thompson, Equipment Operator Senior, Anthony.

Celebrating 5 years: Kevin Atteberry, Equipment Operator Senior, Great Bend.

Seven points about beet juice

If you work for the Kansas Department of Transportation, you probably know we use beet juice to help battle ice on highways during the winter.

But could you pass a pop quiz on it? Do you know how to explain why KDOT crews use sugar beet juice to fight wintry road conditions?

Think of it this way: The sugar in sugar beet juice offers sweet benefits for ice-fighting efforts on the highways, especially when pre-treating trouble areas like bridges, which tend to ice up faster than non-elevated pavement. There's a chemistry at work, says Jim Frye, Field Maintenance Manager/Emergency Coordinator with KDOT.



A “beet juice”-labeled storage tank in Wichita. The juice is a byproduct of sugar beet processing. The juice helps to hold brine to pavement, which limits ice formation at lower temperatures. Tim Potter/Photo

forming into (ice) crystals. Come to find out, sugar helps the water molecules from freezing solid down in these lower temperatures. It keeps it slushy, which is what we want.”

Frye recently gave beet and brine application training to District Five snow-and-ice crews in Larned and Wichita.

Here are seven points -- and a little science lesson -- from the teacher that could help you pass the quiz and explain it to others:

--Beet juice added to brine (saltwater) is especially useful with temperatures from 15 down to 5 degrees. That's because beet juice, as Frye says, “slows the process of water molecules



Jim Frye talks with District Five employees during beet/brine application training on Jan. 14 in Wichita. Tim Potter/Photo

--Because beet juice is sticky, it holds ice-fighting brine to pavement longer.

--Other advantages: By using a mix of beet and brine, it takes less brine, so it lowers the corrosive effect of the salt in brine -- which helps cut down on road and bridge repair. It also reduces the amount of salt seeping into the environment.

--Does beet juice look brownish and get on vehicles? Yes, but it will wash off with water.

--KDOT uses beet juice to pretreat or treat highways at more than 20 locations around the state.

--KDOT has used beet juice for about five years now.

--The beet juice comes from an Iowa supplier. ■

How to properly flag traffic in a work zone



District Five Safety Specialist Paul Thomas with a flagger paddle. Thomas recently gave training on how to properly flag motorists in work zones. Tim Potter/Photo

It's one of the most important safety tasks a KDOT worker does -- being a flagger in a work zone.

It's a job that aims to protect the motoring public as well as crews in a work zone.

Besides the safety considerations, there's a public relations side: "Remember, you're out there representing the state of Kansas," District Five Safety Specialist Paul Thomas told employees at recent flagging training in Hutchinson.

To the untrained eye, holding a "Stop" paddle for approaching traffic might seem like a simple thing. Not so. There are layers of safety factors -- and a discipline to be followed. Here are some of the rules Thomas went over:

--When stopping traffic, "Stand on the shoulder and always face traffic." Once traffic is stopped, move to the centerline so other traffic can see you. And this reminder from KDOT Safety Coordinator Mark Johnson: "When you come to the centerline, watch for traffic from both directions, not only the cars coming into the work zone but leaving the work zone."

--Hold the sign out from your body so the sign won't blend in and can be seen clearly.

--"Plan an escape in case of an emergency."

--Be alert: "You can tell if they're (approaching vehicles) slowing down or not, especially if it's a semi or big truck." "Keep your mind on the job." "Stand alone."

--"Do not leave your position until appropriately relieved."

--"Be courteous and professional," in actions and clothing.

--Wear correct clothing for visibility: a KDOT Class II/III vest and KDOT orange hat, stocking cap or hard hat.

--Rotate flaggers frequently to counter mental or physical fatigue. "It gets hot standing out there on that pavement," Thomas said.

--Use a pilot car when the flagger at the other end is not visible. The maximum speed in the work zone -- where workers are present -- is 20 mph. Otherwise, it is 40 mph.

"Again," Thomas told the trainees, "you're there to make sure you guys get home at the end of the day." ■