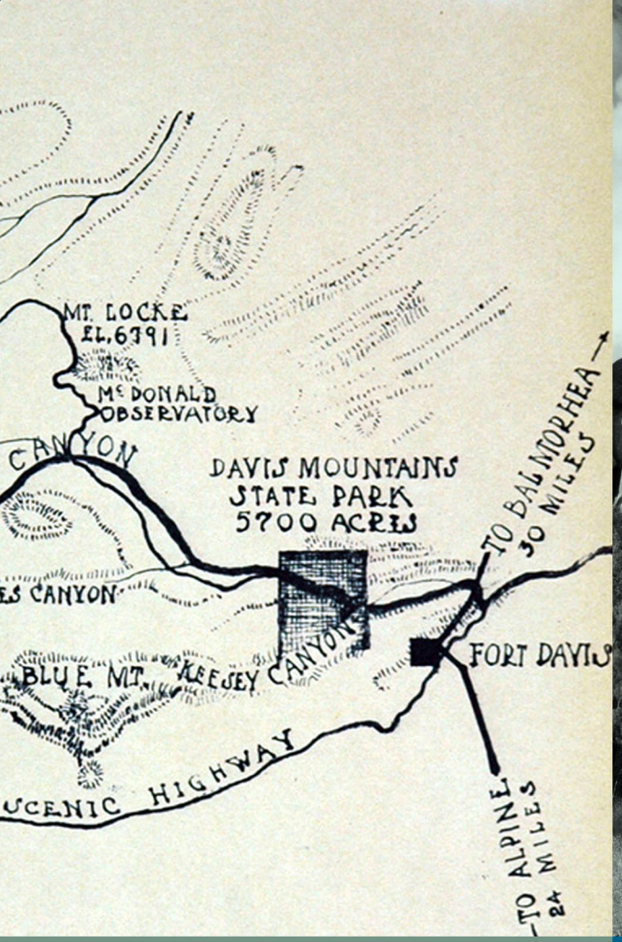
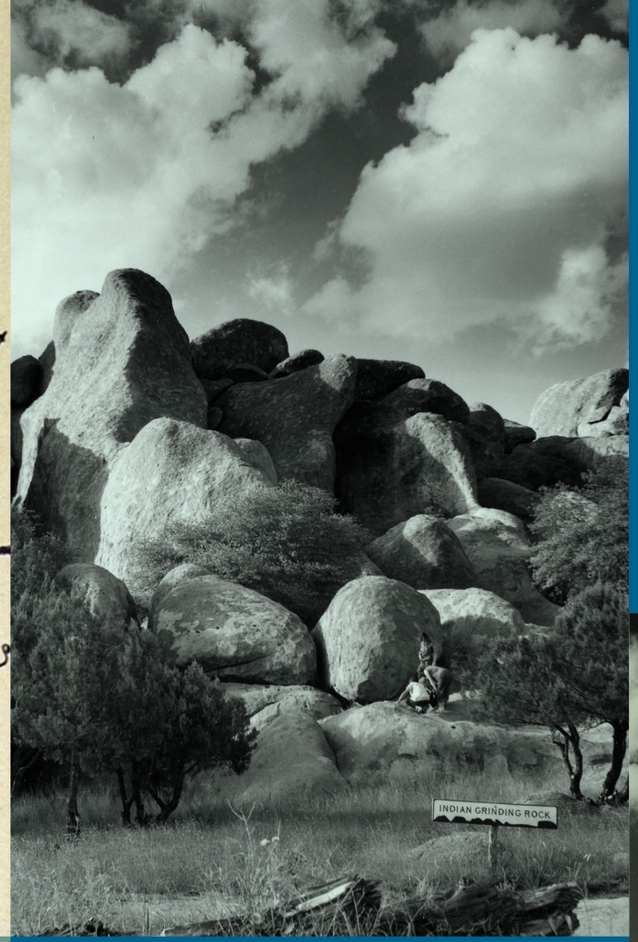


From the beginning, settlers in the Fort Davis region have treasured the unique beauty of the Davis Mountains. By the twentieth century, local efforts to develop the region as a tourist destination increased due to the national rise of the automobile and tourism. By the 1920s, a large segment of the population regarded the automobile as a way to escape the rapidly modernizing world and explore the natural and scenic wonders of America. Automobile tourists ventured out into the country away from the restrictions of city life. The nation's limited road infrastructure, however, convinced many to form "Good Roads" organizations that in turn lobbied state and local governments to fund road improvements.



For Additional Information:

Fort Davis Chamber of Commerce
Box 378
Fort Davis, TX 79734
1-800-524-3015
www.fortdavis.com

The Davis Mountains State Park is reached by traveling 1 mile north of Fort Davis on State Highway 17 to State Highway 118N, then west on State Highway 118N for 3 miles to Park Road 3 entrance.

www.txdot.gov
www.dot.state.tx.us/travel

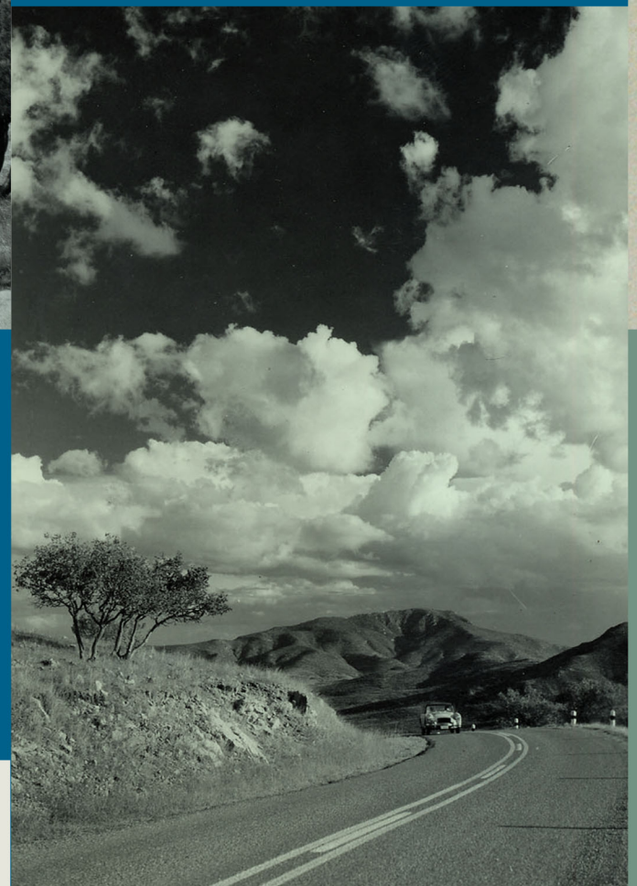
Texas Department of Transportation

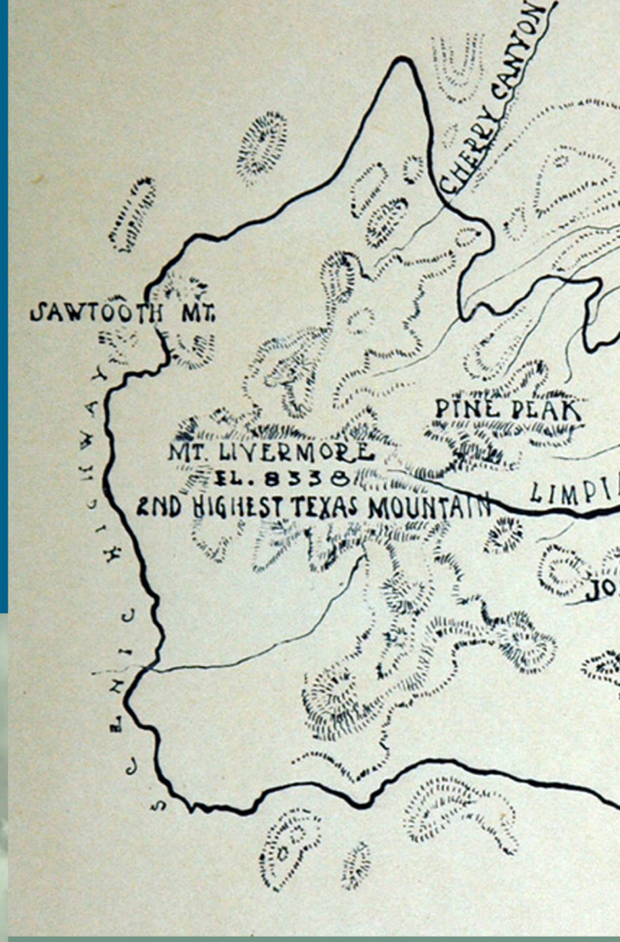
Davis Mountains

State Park Highway

"...I doubt if 75 miles of more beautiful country could be found in Texas."

G.B. Finley
Texas Highway Department
Division Engineer, 1928





The 75-mile Davis Mountains State Park Highway provides a majestic escape into one of Texas' most spectacular landscapes and offers tourists breathtaking views of Sawtooth Mountain, Mounts Locke and Livermore, and Madera Canyon. The road also represents significant efforts by individuals and the state to open the beauty of the Davis Mountains to increasing numbers of automobile tourists in the 1920s and 1930s. The story of the Davis Mountains State Park Highway includes visionaries, enlightened political and civic leaders, as well as talented engineers and craftsmen.

Davis Mountains State Park

Established in 1933, the Davis Mountains State Park encompasses approximately 2,700 acres. (TxDOT Photo Archives)

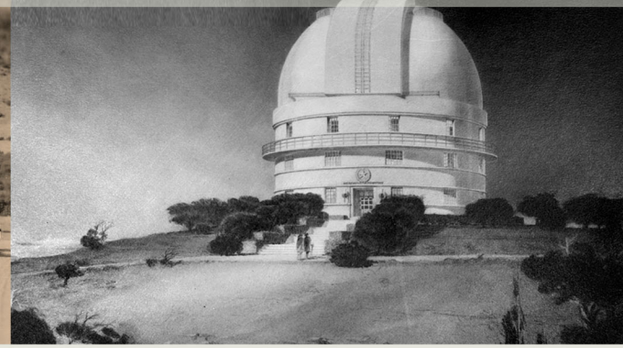
Indian Lodge

Constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Indian Lodge sits within the majestic Keesey Canyon at the Davis Mountains State Park. (TxDOT Photo Archives)

Roadside Parks

A roadside park along the Davis Mountains State Park Highway, ca. 1950. (TxDOT Photo Archives)

McDonald Observatory



Completed in 1939, the McDonald Observatory sits atop Mount Locke alongside the Davis Mountains State Park Highway. (The Archives of the Big Bend, Sul Ross State University)

In Texas, several key individuals led efforts to expand and improve automobile routes in the state. Among these were David Colp and State Senator Thomas Love from Dallas. Long a visitor to the Davis Mountains, Senator Love envisioned the region as a tourist gateway. Jeff Davis County residents also lobbied for state investment in the Davis Mountains. By 1925, Love and others began advocating for the construction of a scenic highway and a state park in the Davis Mountains. The completion in 1922 of the Columbia River Highway, an Oregon road built solely with automobile tourists in mind, likely influenced Texas proponents of a Davis Mountains scenic highway. In 1927, Love led the passage of Senate Bill No. 15, establishing the Davis Mountains State Park Highway. Despite the legislation, no initial construction took place due to conflicting priorities within the Texas Highway Department.

In 1930, Texas highway engineers and surveyors completed the survey for the new road. The newly designed route emphasized the highlights and natural setting of the Davis Mountains. Two years later, construction finally began. The Texas Highway Department hired local residents as laborers, and by 1933, 16 miles of road had been constructed. State highway officials, however, suspended further work on the road due to budgetary concerns. Nevertheless, the Fort Davis region received good news upon the announcement in 1933 that the University of Texas planned to erect the McDonald Observatory in the Davis Mountains. The construction and location of the scenic highway played an instrumental role in locating the observatory in Jeff Davis County.

Another significant development for the region occurred in June 1933, when the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), aworker relief program created by President Roosevelt, established two camps in Fort Davis. Over the next two years, these young CCC workers built numerous recreational and tourist improvements at the Davis Mountains State Park. Notable improvements included the three-mile scenic Skyline Drive and the construction of Indian Lodge, a tourist hotel beautifully sited in Keesey Canyon. Skyline Drive and Indian Lodge remain today as lasting reminders of the efforts and craftsmanship of the CCC in Jeff Davis County during the Great Depression.

Despite these significant developments within the region, construction on the scenic highway continued to experience delays due to hard economic times. In 1937, the Texas Highway Department finally renewed construction efforts and built a 22-mile stretch of road through difficult mountainous terrain. An additional 21 one miles were completed in 1941-42. The onset of World War II, however, suspended state highway construction. Following the war, the final 14 miles were completed in 1947. To celebrate the accomplishment, Fort Davis residents and state officials held an official opening in June 1947.

After the completion of the roadway, the Texas Highway Department constructed nine roadside parks alongside the scenic loop. Designed by landscape architect Ben Lednicky, the parks provided auto tourists with convenient and beautiful sites for picnics and recreational activities. State officials also developed signage noting recreational and historical sites along the highway, including the historic Prude Ranch, H.E. Sproul Ranch, McDonald Observatory and Bloys Camp Meeting Site.

Today, the Davis Mountains Scenic Loop Highway continues to serve as a gateway into the Davis Mountains and to a range of activities including astronomical observation, horseback riding, hiking, and camping. The highway is considered among the most beautiful roads in Texas and remains one of the few designed solely for tourists. The Davis Mountains State Park Highway continues to reveal the unique grandeur of the Davis Mountains to those who follow its course.

1925
Automobile registrations in Texas reach 975,000

1927
The 40th Texas State Legislature passes Senate Bill No. 15 establishing the Davis Mountains State Park Highway

1932-33
Texas Highway Department begins construction of the Davis Mountains State Park Highway

1933
In June, two CCC camps arrive in Fort Davis; in September, Davis Mountains State Park established

1937-39
Construction on Davis Mountains State Park Highway resumes from Fowlkes Ranch to Moore's Ranch, a distance of 22 miles

1939
University of Texas and the University of Chicago formally dedicate the recently completed McDonald Observatory on Mount Locke

1941-42
Texas Highway Department continues construction of highway from Moore's Ranch to Skillman's Grove, a distance of 21 miles

1947
The final 14 miles of the Davis Mountains State Park Highway is completed; the highway officially opens in June