

Imagine a time when cars and trucks did not have air conditioning. Picture an era when there were no Interstate highways. Visualize a time when automobile travel was young. Dream of a world where everything moved at a slower pace. If you can create this image in your mind, then



Time for a break from the highway and the heat.

you will have a good idea why Texas developed its first picnic areas, the beginning of the state's vast roadside park program.

Created in typically shady areas, these roadside oases offered drivers and their passengers some respite on hot summer days. Where no natural shade existed, shelters or arbors were frequently built. Begun in 1935, there were 674 such "wayside" parks scattered across Texas by the end of 1938.

These early picnic areas were constructed during the Great Depression, a time of economic turmoil and widespread unemployment, by the young men of the National Youth Administration (NYA). NYA provided employment to young people between the ages of 16 and 25 who were not full-time students or already employed. The goals of the NYA were to provide its workers with education, employment, vocational training and "profitable use of time." Lyndon Baines Johnson, later the 36<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, served as the first director of NYA's Texas branch from 1935 to 1937.

Construction of park facilities was quite labor-intensive. NYA workers usually quarried and dressed their own stone and felled their own trees for lumber. Heavy machinery was noticeably absent from

construction – most all the work was done by hand.

Constructed in the then-popular "rustic" style, Depression-era picnic areas are recognizable by their masonry furnishings. Stone and concrete were used in the construction of picnic tables and benches, barbecue pits, walls, pathways and rubbish burners.



An example of the many handbuilt rustic style furnishings.

All the picnic area sites were either donated to the state by their owners or purchased by counties and civic clubs and deeded to the Texas Highway Department, the predecessor to today's Texas Department of Transportation. Sites ranged in size from less than an acre to more than a dozen acres.

The NYA paid for the labor, while the highway department was responsible for providing the plans, supervision, materials and equipment. By today's standard, the picnic areas were a veritable bargain. The first 200 were completed at a cost of about \$230,000, of which the department paid about a third.

Spurred by the availability of inexpensive labor, land donations, and the expected influx of visitors to the Lone Star State for the 1936 Texas Centennial celebration in Dallas, the roadside park program was launched under the direction of Jac L. Gubbels, the department's first landscape architect. Picnic areas were designed to take advantage of the natural beauty of each site.



A National Youth Administration (NYA) crew builds a picnic table and bench near Gainesville.

An article in the September 1936 issue of Texas Parade magazine describes the picnic areas in the following language:

"As the wanderer in the desert welcomes the oasis, so the Texas motorist hails with joy these little off-the-road nooks which offer rest and relaxation after a ride in the broiling sun."

Several other historically significant picnic areas were constructed in the late 1940s, using the same masonry and construction techniques employed in the previous decade. These parks are located on the

"scenic loop" in Jeff Davis County (State Highways 118 and 166) – roads built during the 1930s with work-relief agency labor.

What has happened to all these picnic areas? Some of them are now just memories – closed when traffic flowed to newer, faster highways; others were shut down when they deteriorated and became a maintenance problem; some became victims of vandalism, vagrancy and nuisance activity. Many others are still in place, but have lost the majority of their NYA-constructed amenities over the years. However, 41 of these sites are still open, their original furnishings largely intact and serving their originally intended function more than 60 years later. Most vehicles are now air-conditioned, and the pace of life has quickened considerably since the 1930s, but the remaining Depression-era roadside parks still offer a refuge to the weary traveler.

Would you like to visit a Depression-era picnic area? The map on the reverse side of this brochure lists the location of the remaining parks. Inspect the craftsmanship that went into the fixtures. Rest under the shade trees, as countless other travelers have before you. Let your mind wander back to a time when life was not so hectic.

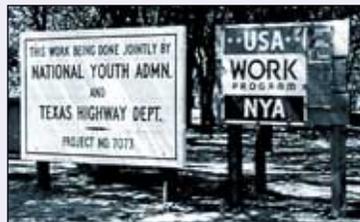
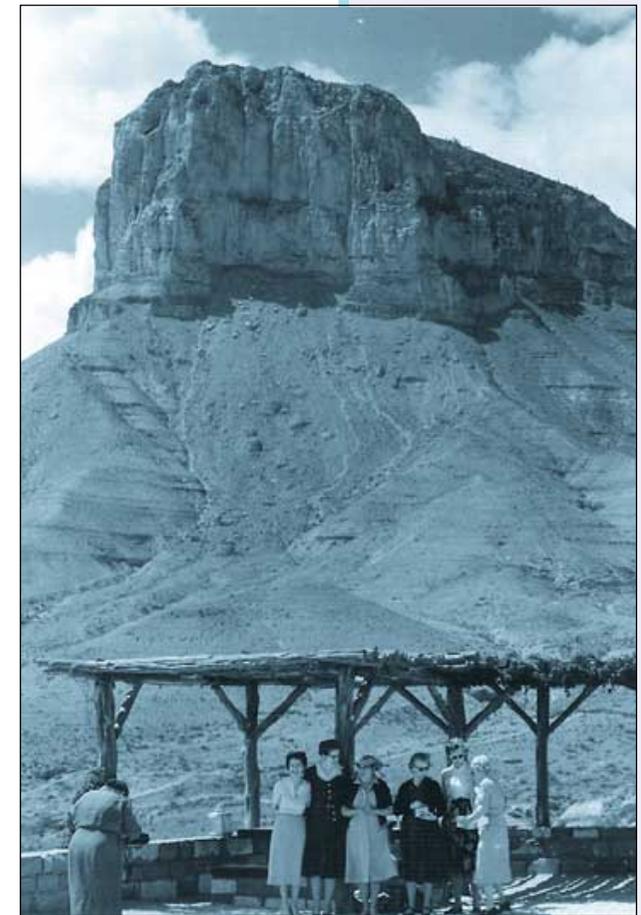
(Please note: These picnic areas do not have restroom facilities.)



Dedication of a roadside park (above) near Paris sometime in the 1930s.

A roadside park (right) built at El Capitan Peak in the Guadalupe Mountains.

Taking a break (below) at a shady roadside rest area south of LaGrange on U.S. 77 in 1958.



Signs announcing another National Youth Administration (NYA) project in conjunction with the then Texas Highway Department.

