

NUMBER NINE

BY JEANETTA CALHOUN MISH | PHOTO BY SHANE BROWN

A single-digit highway led one Oklahoman home in more than one way—and eventually landed her at love's door.

THINK IT WAS alliteration that made Number Nine my favorite highway, the way it sounded like a chant, a charm. I was a poet even as a child and would sit in the back seat of my grandparents' car, losing myself in the rhythm of the rocking road that sang its name: "number nine, number nine, number nine." I don't recall folks calling it Highway Nine in the Sixties and early Seventies—it was *No* Nine. For some reason, in my mind it is always written with the old-fashioned symbol for number, a capital "n" and a superscripted, underlined "o."

It's not like Number Nine was the only highway around or even the most familiar one. My grandparents' farm was on Old 270, just a mile east of the intersection of Old 270 and New 270, at the New Lima Y. I knew both of those roads so well that I could close my eyes in the back seat of my mother's green 1960 Studebaker Lark station wagon—or, much later, her red Ninety-Eight Olds—and know which turn, which curve, which bottom-of-the-hill bump we'd just passed.

Nevertheless, Number Nine put a spell on me, and for most of my young life, and still yet today, I think of the topography of Oklahoma not in terms of "south of I-40" and "east of I-35" but instead, north or south of Number Nine. For me, home is south of Number Nine, all along its route. From Hobart in the west, where I was born while my father

was working in Burns Flat; to Chickasha, where my mother's family had lived before following the Big Yank blue jeans factory to Wewoka, where I grew up; to Eufaula Lake, whose muddy waters cooled and fed us during cicada-hummed summers.

Some of my earliest memories involve Number Nine, specifically the Dairy Queen at Wetumka, where, when we were on our way to or back from Eufaula Lake, Grandpa could be counted on to buy Dilly Bars for everyone. We'd eat our ice cream in the parking lot, sitting on the tailgate of the truck. (I'm happy to say that the Wetumka Dairy Queen is still in business, and last summer, I honored the family tradition: While driving Number Nine in preparation for this article, I stopped there and found relief from the 110-degree day with a Dilly Bar.)

As I got older, Number Nine became both the delimiter of my world and the tantalizing suggestion of something beyond. By the time I was sixteen, the highway had quit singing its name. Instead, as my friend, Oklahoma poet Joey Brown, writes of her hometown highway, 81 to Comanche, Number Nine began to call out, "Run, cut and run."

And run we did, to Norman most often, at breakneck suicide speeds down Number Nine, sometimes bottoming out at the end of a hill, sometimes catching air at the crest of one. The trip to Norman was a pilgrimage: It was a mythic place, the bastion of learning, the cathedral of football, and the place to party. Number Nine to Norman gave us music—concerts at Lloyd Noble—and a taste of teenage freedom.

It would be poetic to say that when I left Oklahoma two weeks after high school graduation, I drove east or west on Number Nine, but I didn't. My mother drove me to the airport on I-40. I remember staring out

the window of the plane, trying to trace Number Nine's route for what I was sure would be the last time.

I STAYED GONE FROM Oklahoma for most of twenty years, but I dreamed of Number Nine, of hurtling down the highway on moonless nights, the headlights barely piercing the darkness, feeling more than seeing the animal movement at the edge of the road.

In 1995, I was living in Telluride, Colorado, and I needed to go to Vermont by way of West Texas, where I would drop off my two-year-old son for a few weeks with his grandparents. I decided to take the southern route as far as I could and talked a friend into making the trip with me, promising we'd sample the barbecue in every state. I had another, hidden motive—I wanted to drive the entirety of Number Nine, from the Texas border to the Arkansas line.

I didn't want to admit, not even to myself, that I was homesick for Oklahoma. Instead, I justified the choice of route by telling myself that driving across the state might stop the recurring haunting dreams of Number Nine. We drove from Madge to Braden, stopping for barbecue at Van's Pig Stand in Norman. When I returned to Telluride, the dreams returned, more vivid than before.

They didn't stop until 2003, when my son and I moved back home, not just to Oklahoma, but to Number Nine, to Norman, where I would attend the university. Later, I moved my mother and grandmother back home from North Texas and found them a place just a few blocks from the highway.

It was in Norman that I met the love of my life, the man who would become my husband. I knew for sure he was the one the first time he took me to his house. It was on a ridge east of Norman, on Number Nine. 🐾

Visible from State Highway Nine, the red bluffs in Verden are a distinctive geographic landmark.

