

Parking a Story About Parking

Written by Jack Money

Monday, 10 September 2007 00:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 22 February 2009 03:18



SEPTEMBER, 2007: During the last week of September in 1929, Oklahoma Cityans who worked downtown or otherwise needed to go there had something new to deal with. City fathers decided they were through with forcing motorists to weave their way through downtown arteries clogged with parkers during morning and afternoon rush hours, so they banned parking along the streets during those times of day.

News reports of the day celebrated the change: "Pedestrians, having their day at last, and giggling about it, may swagger down the sidewalks with an air of maddening superiority. The Robinson avenue canyon, pride of the Chamber of Commerce, will be stranglely wide and inviting as the parking ban goes into effect. So, too, will the previously congested sections in Hudson and Harvey avenues.

Parking a Story About Parking

Written by Jack Money

Monday, 10 September 2007 00:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 22 February 2009 03:18

"Business is expected to be the best ever at automobile hotels and storage garages. Street railway magpies are ready to burst with municipal pride, their civic patriotism reaching heights simply never dreamed of before. Even the oldest residents may see shops and stores they've never seen before, as they roll through the streets minus the customary lines of parked automobiles," crooned The Oklahoman about the change. (1)

But a short five years later, city fathers still were observing congestion problems. Oklahoma City's traffic commission recommended the city try using something new called "meter parking" along some of its downtown streets. (2)

In May, 1935, Oklahoma City Council members approved installing 200 meters downtown. It would cost a nickel to park for 15 minutes. Traffic officials estimated the meters and fines for over-parked vehicles would raise about \$75,000 annually. The switch angered some city residents.

Carl C. Magee, head of a Chamber of Commerce committee that studied downtown parking problems and who later founded the Dual Parking Meter Company, explained on the pages of The Oklahoman why he made his recommendation. Magee said he started the study purely from the standpoint of the interests of downtown retail merchants and their customers. What he found is that downtown workers were parking in 80 percent of the available street parking where they worked, leaving customers scant few places to park.

"People who work downtown all day should find some other means of transportation back and forth from home, or should put their cars out of the way in parking lots," Magee wrote. "They put a burden upon their own means of earning a livelihood by shutting their own customers out of the business area." (3)

Within months, the case went to court. Ultimately, judges ruled that while it might be a right to drive on the city's streets, parking was a privilege that could be granted and regulated by the city. Once that issue was resolved, more meters started going in, and time limits were upped to as long as an hour in some locations.

Of course, someone had to regulate their use, and that job fell to police. During the years, the process has changed. Today, the city uses "parking enforcement technicians" who patrol

Parking a Story About Parking

Written by Jack Money

Monday, 10 September 2007 00:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 22 February 2009 03:18

downtown streets in small, golf cart-like vehicles where they check parked cars for over parking and expired tags. They cannot arrest offenders, but they can call for officers if someone gets unruly. It's been known to happen.

In 1999, city leaders did something unprecedented -- they changed meters located near City Hall to give them two hour time limits. The request was made by former Councilman Jack Cornett, who said one-hour limits did not give residents attending meetings at City Hall enough time to take care of their business. (4)

In 2005 -- 70 years after the initial unveiling of the parking meter -- they introduced a new version of the equipment into downtown. These new meters took not only coins, but also credit cards. "It's going to be fun to try something that I think is going to be leading edge," said Dave Lopez, president of Downtown OKC Inc. "It's a trial to see how efficient this can be and to see how quickly people are able to adapt to it." (5)

You can find those computerized meters downtown today. But they likely are disliked as much as their predecessors, we're betting.

- 1) "Be Sure You're Right, Then Park and Walk," The Oklahoman, Sep. 23, 1929
- 2) "Board Favors Traffic Meter," The Oklahoman, Oct. 26, 1934
- 3) "A Personal Message from Carl C. Magee," The Oklahoman, May 13, 1935
- 4) "City Hall Parking Meter Time Limit Up to 2 Hours," The Oklahoman, April 12, 1999
- 5) City to begin testing high-tech parking meters," The Oklahoman, Aug. 17, 2005