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Route 66, “The Mother Road”

What is it about Route 66 that fascinates people? There are newer, safer, better highways, but Route 66 inspires Americans like no other road. There are many organizations now fighting for the preservation and restoration of this historic highway. Route 66 was neither the first nor the longest road across America. Lincoln Highway was built 13 years earlier and spanned 13 states - 5 more than Route 66. Dixie Highway in the southern United States was also started more than a decade earlier. However, it is Route 66 that has captured America's - and the world's - imagination.



An old car, similar to ones that some Okies drove to California in the 1930s and 1940s, stands behind the Wigwam Village Motel office in Holbrook, Arizona in 1999.

© AP Images

The Brilliant Past of Route 66

The beginnings of Route 66 go back to November 1926 and to a man named Cyrus Avery, a member of the federal board whose task was to create the Federal Highway System. Cyrus Avery reserved the number 66 for the new interstate road. Numbers were assigned as the roads were built, and our road was very nearly given the number 60. The builders of another road, however, claimed this number and "62" was taken in the meantime. Avery, who believed a number must be round and easy to remember, chose 66. He also established the U.S. Highway 66 Association to ensure financial support for his favorite creation. These helped cover the expenses for paving, and in 1938 Route 66 truly was the first fully paved American highway.

The highway started in Chicago, Illinois, headed down south to Springfield in the same state and St. Louis in the bordering state of Missouri. Route 66 then ran all the way west, through Kansas, then via Tulsa and Oklahoma City in Oklahoma, Amarillo in Texas, Santa Fe and Albuquerque in New Mexico, Flagstaff in Arizona, and finally to LA in California. Beginning in Chicago, one could drive 2,400 miles (3,862 km) and pass through eight states from Illinois to California.

But driving was not the only special thing about Route 66. That is one of the reasons why the highway came to mean so much more than just a road for the people who were using it.

The 1930s were a remarkable time in the history of Route 66. It was then that the road received its famous nickname; "The Mother Road." John Steinbeck, in his novel "The Grapes of Wrath," coined the expression that was to outlive its origins in the ecological disaster known as the "Dust Bowl." Continuing destructive storms of dust destroyed the fields and forced whole families of farmers from the southern Great Plains to leave their homes and head west to California. For them, Route 66 was a road of flight and a road of hope.

Route 66 is perhaps best known today for the unique architecture and attractions for visitors that developed along the road. In order to encourage travelers to stop, motels, restaurants and tourist centers created signs and styles ranging from the fanciful to the bizarre. Some motels, for example, were built in the shape of Native American wigwams. From the outside, with their characteristic teepee shape and a red zigzag pattern, they seem small. In fact they are quite comfortable and offer a standard set of furniture, complete with a coin operated radio set. Today two wigwam motels on Route 66 in Arizona are still in operation.

Besides motels, travelers on Route 66 needed good places to eat. Some of the drive-in restaurants and bars appeared along the Mother Road. One of the most unusual places to eat is The Big Texan Steak Ranch in Amarillo, Texas. In operation since 1960, the restaurant has a peculiar challenge for non-vegetarian big eaters: a \$72 meal consisting of a 72 oz (2 kg) steak, a potato, bread roll with butter, ranch beans, shrimp cocktail, and salad entirely on the house if ... it all gets eaten in under an hour. There is a special table on a platform and a digital clock at the back ready for a daredevil. The official website claims there have been over 40,000 attempts and 7,000 refunds to those who have succeeded (the meal has to be paid for in advance).

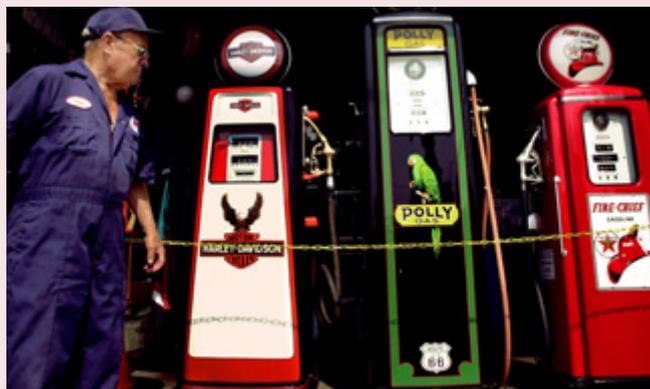
Besides restaurants, there were also cafes and diners on Route 66. Frozen custard stands lured the drivers to stop and cool off with a refreshingly icy and creamy treat. There were curio shops selling Indian handicrafts. There were also reptile farms along Route 66, where one could take a close look at alligators and snakes. Route 66 also featured peculiar roadside architecture, which, disregarding its artistic merit, distinguishes Route 66 from all the other highways. The most popular landmarks include the leaning water tower



The Pine Breeze Inn, shown here Nov. 25, 2003 in Belmont, Arizona, was featured in the movie "Easy Rider" in the late 1960s. © AP Images



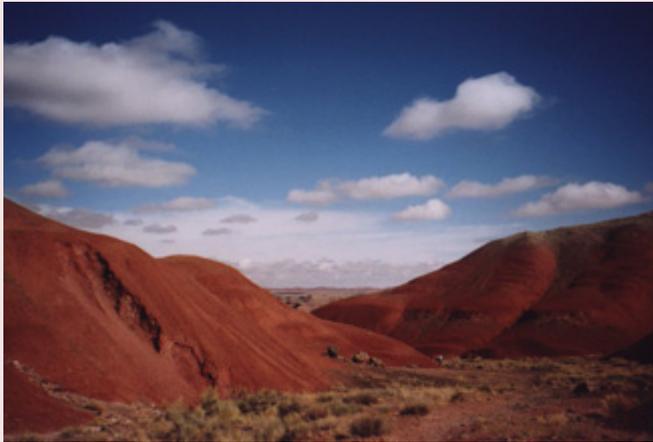
A customer shows off the "World Famous" Big Texas Steak Ranch's 72-ounce steak in Amarillo, Texas in 1998. © AP Images



Bill Shea checks on his gas pumps that are part of the Route 66 collectibles displayed at Bill Shea's Gas Station Museum along "old Route 66" in Springfield, Illinois. © AP Images

in Texas, Round Barn in Arcadia, Arizona, Gemini Giant in Wilmington, Illinois, Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo, Texas, the Big Blue Whale in Catoosa, Oklahoma, and Coleman Theater in Miami, Oklahoma.

Nature itself helps to promote Route 66. Fabulous views, especially in Arizona and Utah, opened up a whole new world for the traveler: Oatman Road through the Black Mountains, Glen and Bryce Canyons in Utah, the Painted Desert, Meteor Crater and the Grand Canyon. Hairpin turns to the Valley of the Gods offered breathtaking views as well as a driving thrill. The highway opened a gateway to California for tourists and was crucial for the tourism trade. The phenomenon of Route 66 was that you didn't have to travel it to know it. Thanks to the TV and movie industry and Nat King Cole's version of the song "Get Your Kicks on Route 66," people all over the world knew the road's bends and stretches. You didn't have to ever walk through the door of the West End Diner to know what it was like: a long bar counter with stools in a row, the tables and chairs arranged like compartments in a car. You saw it in so many movies that it became an all familiar sight. Route 66 became an icon representing this specifically American automobile culture of the open highway. Text by AIRC Krakow



The Painted Desert (left) occupies the northern part of the Petrified Forest National Park in eastern Arizona. The mile-wide Meteor Crater (right) near Winslow, Arizona was made 500 centuries ago when a 10,000,000-ton meteor impact dislodged 300,000,000 tons of rock. The 600-foot-deep crater is three miles in circumference. © AP Images

What Does the Future Hold in Store for Route 66?

Today there is hope for the future, but back in 1956 when President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Interstate Highway Act, the fate of Route 66 seemed in jeopardy. The Act gave a green light to building new high-speed roads which would slowly but surely start to by-pass the two-lane Mother Road. As the new roads were added, the old Route 66 became less and less frequently used. Finally, in 1985 Route 66 was officially decommissioned and vanished from American road maps.

The demise of Route 66 put an end to the many roadside businesses that had developed along it. Its many motels, restaurants, gas stations, and garages soon became empty and desolate. Years of disuse led to degradation of the buildings.

Despite this demise, fortunately Route 66 meant too much for too many to be completely forgotten. In the 1990s, the Historic Route 66 Associations and the National Historic Route 66 Federation were founded with the aim to "preserve the historic landmarks and revitalize the economies of communities along the entire 2,400-mile stretch of road." International Associations in France, Belgium, Holland, Canada and Norway also joined the effort to revitalize the old route. Parts of the Mother Road were declared "Historic Route 66" and marked accordingly.

The results of the associations' activities are manifold: there are now numerous Route 66 museums, the "Adopt-A-Hundred Program" allows volunteers to take care of 100 mile stretches of Route 66, and there are now maps and guides of the old route. Last but not least, there are rallies, fun runs and various social events all revolving around old Route 66. Text by AIRC Krakow



Classic cars cruise through San Bernardino, Calif., during the 10th annual Stater Brothers Route 66 Rendezvous.



Visitors at "Cadillac Ranch" where ten Cadillacs are buried in the ground.

© AP Images

Activity Page

Exercise 1: Comprehension

Can you answer the following questions without referring back to the text?

- 1/ How many states did Route 66 pass through? Do you remember which states they were?
- 2/ Why did Route 66 come to mean more than just a road to many people?
- 3/ What did you have to do to listen to the radio in the Wigwam Motel?
- 4/ Why did whole families of farmers from the southern Great Plains have to leave their homes and move to California?
- 5/ What does the Big Texan Steak Ranch in Amarillo challenge guests to do?
- 6/ In what way did TV boost the popularity of Route 66?
- 7/ What is the aim of the National Historic Route 66 Federation?

Exercise 2: Proverbs

Can you explain in your own words what these proverbs mean?
No answer key is provided for this exercise, so you are on your own :-)

- No one was ever lost on a straight road.
- No road is long with good company.
- All roads lead to Rome.
- Be sure you know the road before you act as guide.
- The road of life is lined with many milestones.
- The road to hell is paved with good intentions.
- There is no royal road to learning.
- Don't cross the road till you come to it.
- Every road has a turning.
- No flowery road leads to glory.
- Follow the straight road.



Route 66 Fun Run participants cross the finish line in Golden Shores, Arizona. © AP Images

More on the Web

Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program (U.S. National Park Service): www.nps.gov/history/rt66/HistSig/index.htm

Route 66 associations: www.nps.gov/history/rt66/Links/ass.htm

The Mother Road: Historic Route 66: www.historic66.com/

National Historic Route 66 Federation: www.national66.com/

The People's Highway (National Museum of American History): http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/exhibition/exhibition_10_1.html

Wikipedia: U.S. Route 66: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Route_66

World Monuments Fund: Historic Route 66 Project: www.wmf.org/project/historic-route-66

Zoom is available online at

<http://hungary.usembassy.gov/zoom.html>

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Answer key: http://hungary.usembassy.gov/quiz_key.html

Glossary (in order of appearance)

to span - to extend from side to side

Okies - originally from the state of Oklahoma. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, the term came to refer to people who migrated from the South, Midwest, and Southeast United States - many from Oklahoma - to the West to settle there and find a living in the region's agriculture and manufacturing industries.

to pave - to cover with concrete, asphalt, etc.

flight - (here) attempt to escape

daredevil - a person who enjoys doing dangerous things

diner - a small restaurant built to look like a dining car of a train, often with a counter along one side and booths on the other

custard - a dessert of sweet sauce

curio - a rare, unusual or intriguing object

reptiles - cold-blooded animals, for example snakes, lizards, turtles, etc.

hairpin turn - a sharp curve in the road

kick - (here): pleasure and excitement

to dislodge - to force from a position or place

circumference - a line bounding a circle or a rounded surface

desolate - uninhabited, deserted

demise - a ceasing to exist, death

rendezvous - a meeting, or the place where they meet