

**ROUTE 66**

**Mark S. Lovely  
February 3, 1994**

## Route 66

Let me say right at the beginning that this paper may not be for everybody. If you prefer plane trips to car trips, interstates to backroads, fast food to local cuisine, hotels to motels, a nap in the backseat to time behind the wheel, hard tops to rag tops, and making good time to making time good - then I guess this paper isn't for you....But if you appreciate an open highway, a full tank, cheap souvenirs, roadside attractions, and the lure of the mythical American West - then I have a topic you may like.

It was Charles Kuralt who said "Thanks to the Interstate Highway System, it is now possible to travel across the country from coast to coast without seeing anything."

This paper is a tribute to the Great American Road; what John Steinbeck called the mother road; the first cross-country highway; the departed but always-to-be-remembered Route 66: the Main Street of America.

Surely, you've at least heard of U.S. Route 66. Maybe you know the song written by Bobby Troup and made famous by Nat King Cole. It was 1946 when Troup left Pennsylvania for Hollywood to try to make it as a songwriter. Along the way his wife said "Why don't you write a song about Route 40?" He said that was silly because pretty soon they were going to pick up Route 66. A little way out of St. Louis his wife leaned over to him and said "Get your kicks on Route 66." He said, "God, what a marvelous idea for a song!" and proceeded to put it together over the course of the trip.

Maybe you know about the Route 66 TV show which aired from 1960 to 1964. Martin Milner and George Maharis played Tod Stiles and Buz Murdock, two guys having adventures driving around the country in a Corvette. An updated version of the show was on the air for a few weeks just last summer.

U.S. Route 66, starting at Grant Park in Chicago, reached across more than 2400 miles, three time zones, and eight states - Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California - before it dead-ended at Santa Monica Boulevard and Ocean Avenue in Santa Monica. It was one of the country's first continuous spans of paved highway linking East and West.

John Steinbeck called it "the mother road, the road of flight." Okies knew it as "the glory road." Others called it "the Main Street of America" because it went through the center of so many towns.

Route 66 is Steinbeck and Will Rogers and Woody Guthrie and Merle Haggard and Mickey Mantle and Jack Kerouac. Route 66 is waitresses, service station attendants, fry cooks, truckers, hustlers, state cops, wrecker drivers and motel clerks. Route 66 is a soldier thumbing home for Christmas; an <sup>okie</sup> ~~Ohio~~ family looking for a better life; a station wagon with kids wanting to know how far it is to the Grand Canyon or to Disneyland; an ambulance fleeing a wreck on some lonely curve; a road of phantoms and dreams. Route 66 is the romance of traveling the open highway.

The road was christened in 1926 when the nation was between wars and on the wagon. It was also in 1926 that Henry Ford changed

-more-

the life of the nation by lowering the price of motorcars. More cars and more drivers put pressure on state and federal authorities to come up with some better roads. As late as 1920, the country had only 36,000 miles of all-weather highways that would accommodate automobile traffic.

The father of Route 66 was an Oklahoman by the name of Cy Avery. He was a business man with a burning interest in better roads who held leadership positions in several state and federal highway associations. The Secretary of Agriculture appointed him to work with the Bureau of Better Roads as a consultant. His main job was to lay out and create what would be known as the United States Highway System and create a map showing the most important interstate highways in the country. Because of private road clubs that had popped up all over, there were at least 250 marked trails throughout the U.S. Many of these clubs lobbied to be included in the national highway system. Roads, instead of having names - like Pontiac Trail or Wire Road - were to be assigned numbers. Route 66 ended up coming right through Avery's hometown of Tulsa.

When the proposed federal highway numbering system was first published on November 10, 1925, Kentucky Governor W.J. Fields said his state would not participate and would block signing of roads in Kentucky. The governor objected that the route known as the Midland Trail leading from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco through Kentucky has been divided "into several sections each bearing a different number, thereby obliterating said trail as a transcontinental highway." The even more famous Dixie Highway from

-more-

Michigan to Florida, also important to Kentucky's economy, was similarly broken up. Kentucky alone among states east of the Mississippi was left with no national routes, either north-south or east-west, according to Congressman A. B. Rouse.

What was originally supposed to be Route 60 from Chicago to Los Angeles was changed to Route 62 in early 1926. Part of the federal plan was that numbers ending in a zero would indicate "first class" east-west routes. In order to satisfy Kentucky's complaint that it was denied any major routes on the federal government's first published list of U.S. highways, "60" was assigned to a route that traversed that state. In April of 1926, the states concerned with the Chicago-Los Angeles route - after bitter protests and still chagrined by the loss of the coveted "60" designation -- finally agreed on 66 as preferable to 62. They chose 66 because they liked the way it sounded and the double sixes were easy to remember.

When the road became official in 1926, only 800 miles of the route were paved. The remaining 1,648 miles were graded dirt or gravel, bricks covered with asphalt, or wooden planks. Road improvement efforts started immediately, but it took until 1937 for the entire length to be paved.

The National U.S. 66 Highway Association was formed in 1927 to promote the virtues of the road. It began a national advertising campaign using billboards, newspapers and magazines. Requests for information started pouring in.

Tom Scott, the promotions man for the association, came up

-more-

with a publicity gimmick: a transcontinental foot race from Los Angeles to New York, 3,422 miles. C. C. Pyle, known as the P. T. Barnum of professional sports, promoted the idea. Pyle, who said his initials stood for either Cold Cash or Cash and Carry, depending on the audience, was the man who convinced Red Grange to leave the University of Illinois and join the Chicago Bears. Pyle loved the idea of the race. He was certain that he would make a fortune from \$100 entry fees, programs, and endorsements from shoe, foot ointment, and suntan lotion manufacturers.

The race, along 66 to Chicago, then to Madison Square Garden, was certain to garner publicity for towns along the route. Billed as "C. C. Pyle's International Trans-Continental Foot Race," reporters quickly dubbed it the "Bunion Derby."

On March 4, 1928, 275 runners took their places at the starting line. Red Grange started the race. Some 500,000 well-wishers were on hand. Many participants were bona fide long-distance runners. Others were clad in bibbed overalls and boots. Some ran barefooted. One elderly man carried a cane. Some were accompanied by trainers and family members. There was a hospital bus and a bus for the press. A doctor predicted that anyone who finished the race would have at least 10 years deducted from his lifespan because of the strain. First prize was \$25,000.

Seventy-seven runners dropped out on the first day, a dozen on the second day, 18 more on the third day. The trek was broken up by a ferryboat ride across the Colorado River. By Santa Rosa, New Mexico, only 93 badly-sunburned men were left in the race.

-more-

Andy Payne, a part-Cherokee farm boy from Oklahoma, took the lead just as he reached his home state. He was met by the governor at Oklahoma City. Andy paused at a speaker's stand long enough to say "Hello, home folks. I'm glad to be back. Hope to see you in New York." Schools were closed so everyone could go down to the highway and "root for Andy." A white line in Claremore, Oklahoma, marked the halfway point.

Andy was pressured by Peter Gavuzzi, an Italian from England who was a veteran runner and the odds-on favorite. The two became good pals and often ran side by side. Only 70 runners made it to Chicago. Of the 275 who started, 55 crossed the finish line 87 days after leaving Los Angeles. Andy Payne crossed first, several hours ahead of the remaining runners. He completed the 3,422 mile course in just over 573 hours of actual running time. He paid off the mortgage on his parents' farm and in 1934 became clerk of the state Supreme Court. He was re-elected seven times.

C. C. Pyle ended up losing money on the race but it was a tremendous success for Highway 66, at least in terms of publicity. It helped make Route 66 a household word.

Route 66 had a mini-boom in 1932 when many folks braved a trip to Los Angeles to view the Olympics. Later in the '30s large numbers of people migrated from the Dust Bowl to California using the highway - an experience detailed in "The Grapes of Wrath," John Steinbeck's 1939 novel. But the real golden age of Route 66 was in the time following World War II.

Families could leave their homes in the East and Midwest and

-more-

drive on 66 to see Americana at its best. See the Grand Canyon and the Painted Desert. Pass through towns where Lincoln practiced law, Jesse James robbed banks, and Will Rogers learned how to twirl a rope. Cross into Mark Twain territory where outlaws hid in dark caves and drive through countrysides where cowpokes still chased dogies into the sunset. You could buy Ozark curios and sip sweet cups of cider. There were snake pits and caged critters and real live Indians selling rings and bracelets.

Let me tell you now about some of the famous, not so famous, and infamous attractions along Route 66. Some of them are still there.

- In the small community of McLean, Illinois, there's the Dixie Truckers Home, considered the first real truck stop in the state and one of the first on Route 66. It was called the Dixie in tribute to southern friendliness. Since it opened in 1928, it's been closed only one day. That was in 1965 when the place burned to the ground and operations had to be moved next door. Today it houses the Route 66 Hall of Fame.
- Just a few miles west of a little town called Raymond, on the edge of a cornfield, stands "Our Lady of the Highways," a marble statue of the Virgin Mary. Lights shine on it at night and it stands on a concrete pedestal. A plaque says "Mary, loving mother of Jesus, protect us on the highway."
- In St. Louis check out Ted Drewes Frozen Custard stand

-more-



down on Chippewa Street. It's been there since 1929 and people still come from miles around. The Drewes clan's custard dynasty evolved into an urban Route 66 legend. Despite countless franchising offers, the family has remained firm. "We're not interested in mediocrity," said Ted, Jr.

- Also in St. Louis was the Chain of Rocks Amusement Park with rides, swimming, skating and dancing. The St. Louis Globe-Democrat once said that "a day at the Chain, or Riverview as it is often called, will help any neurotic, hypochondriac, or life-wearied one. It will act the same as an anti-blues serum injected into your blood and will help you to understand poetry." It closed in 1977.
- The Coral Court, an Art Deco motor court on Watson Road still survives. In 1953 a desperado named Carl Austin Hall holed up there the night before he was arrested for the kidnapping and murder of the son of a Kansas City auto dealer. Only half of the \$600,000 in ransom was recovered. Some say the other half is still there.
- Near Stanton, Missouri, is one of the most famous Route 66 attractions, Meramec Caverns, developed in the 1930s by Lester Dill. He bragged he had put more people underground and brought them out alive than anyone else. Every car received a bumper sign, tied on with wire. Dill claimed to have invented the first adhesive bumper signs. The caves were the supposed hideout for the James

-more-

Gang. Dill's son-in-law stumbled upon one J. Frank Dalton, a 100 year-old man living in Oklahoma who said he was actually the Jesse James. They put him up in a cabin next to the entrance to the cave, where he told stories and showed off his gun. The publicity was enormous. Dalton died three days shy of 104 in 1951.

- In Springfield was a restaurant called Red's Giant Hamburg. Red didn't have enough space for the E-R-S. It was the first hamburger stand in the world with a drive-up window. Patrons would drive up and holler orders to the cook through an open window. It closed in the mid '80s.
- Quite a bit of Route 66 survives in the state of Oklahoma to those willing to seek it out. Part of it, in the town of Commerce, is called Mickey Mantle Boulevard in honor of that most famous citizen.
- In Claremore, stop by and see "the world's largest totempole" - 90 feet tall and made of concrete.
- Catoosa was once the home of the Animal Reptile Kingdom and Catoosa Alligator Ranch. It's still there but visitors are no longer welcome. A sign says "Keep Out or Eat Lead."
- You can also see the famous Round Barn in Arcadia then move on to Edmond where Wiley Post is buried. If you want, stop for lunch at the Oklahoma County Line, a barbecue restaurant built in 1918 and known for years as

-more-

"The Kentucky Club," a favorite hangout for Pretty Boy Floyd. It's right next to the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City.

- The last Oklahoma town before Texas is Texola. It used to be something, but now there are a lot of weeds and abandoned buildings. A sign on the edge of town says "There's no place like Texola."
- In the Texas Panhandle is a town called McLean, named after a railroad official, and built on land donated by an English rancher named Alfred Rowe. It was incorporated in 1903. In 1912 Rowe went to his native England for a visit, but he never made it home. His return passage was booked on the maiden voyage of the Titanic. (By the way, one of my favorite road signs is just east of McLean. In huge letters are just three words: "Rattlesnakes - Exit Now.")
- Two of my favorite Route 66 attractions are in the city of Amarillo. One is the Cadillac Ranch. Look to the south just past the western edge of the city, next to both Route 66 and I-40 out in the middle of a field and you'll see a truly unique sight: Ten Cadillacs buried nose down in a perfect row, all at exactly the same angle, with the back halves still sticking out. Each one represents a different style tailfin from Cadillac models from 1948 to 1964. The Cadillac Ranch was put in in 1974 by an eccentric millionaire rancher named Stanley Marsh

-more-

3. It wasn't a whim. He commissioned it as a piece of pop art with a group called the Ant Farm. The Cadillac Ranch is a symbol of the open road, especially open roads heading West. Scrawled deep in the body of one Cadillac is a simple but eloquent message: Bless Route 66.....The other Amarillo place of interest is the Big Texan - the ultimate Texas steakhouse. I call it the most Texas place in Texas. It's exactly what any tourist would want in a Texas steakhouse. There are things like rattlesnake and calf fries on the menu, and singing cowboys make the rounds and take requests for tips. The place was founded by a Kansas City native in the '50s. It moved to a new location next to I-40 in 1968. The Big Texan offers a free 72-ounce steak. All you have to do is eat it all in less than one hour, including the potato, salad and roll. If you can't it's still a bargain at \$35. Among those who have succeeded are an 11-year-old boy, a 63-year-old grandmother, and a 385-pound wrestler who ate not one but two steaks in an hour.

- To see what the real Route 66 must have been like, you can't beat the desert towns of New Mexico, Arizona and California. Exit off I-40 in places like Tucumcari, Gallup and Winslow and you'll find still busy boulevards, still brightened by 1950s era neon and still proud of their architecture from the same period. The desert towns were among the last to be by-passed. When you're

-more-

in Gallup, be sure to check out the El Rancho Hotel and Motel, once a phantom, now completely resurrected. It was built in 1937 and became a hangout of the stars because of all the westerns which were filmed in the area. Famous guests included Spencer Tracy, Kirk Douglas, Humphrey Bogart, Errol Flynn and Ronald Reagan....Here's another tip next time you travel out to see the Grand Canyon, the Petrified Forest, and the Meteor Crater. In Holbrook, Arizona, it's possible to stay in a real Wigwam. Wigwam Village was completely renovated in 1988 and features 15 concrete tepees, each with a full bath and air conditioner.

Route 66 was slowly eaten up over the years by the new Interstate Highway System, leaving only pieces, like a snake chopped up by a garden hose. Now I hear they want to name an Interstate after Route 66. A nice gesture, I guess, but it's a little like naming a new Indian museum after John Wayne.

Route 66 is a little like Elvis Presley - it will never truly die. All over the country there are Route 66 fan clubs; towns that once brought down the old 66 roadsigns are now putting up new ones, so people who still care can still find it.

Route 66 means a time before America became generic - when motels didn't take reservations and movie theaters weren't look-alike shopping center boxes. People sipped ice tea or guzzled Grape Nehi. Billboards were legal everywhere. Hitchhiking was safe. Nobody knew about cholesterol. Summers seemed to last

-more-

longer. Route 66 means motion and excitement. It meant Burma Shave signs and the mythology of the open road and big-boned waitresses serving up burgers, plate lunches and homemade pie.

If you ever plan to motor west, travel my way, take the highway that's the best. It winds from Chicago to L.A., more than 2000 miles all the way. Now you go through Saint Loey and Joplin, Missouri, and Oklahoma City is mighty pretty. You'll see Amarillo; Gallup, New Mexico; Flagstaff, Arizona; Don't forget Winona, Kingman, Barstow, San Bernardino. Won't you get hip to this timely tip: When you make that California trip, get your kicks on Route Sixty-six.

###