
OLD ROUTE 66: GETTING YOUR KICKS IN THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST

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U.S. Route 66 occupies a unique place in American popular culture as not only the road and its destinations, but also as the culture that grew up among the motels and the tourist traps that sprang up along it. Route 66 is known as the Mother Road, the Main Street of America and is formally also known as the Will Rogers Highway, in honor of the legendary star. The original route ran from Chicago, Illinois to Los Angeles, California and its 2,448 mile length passed through Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona before entering California.

Route 66 was born as part of the attempt to develop a better highway system for America. In 1926, the federal government launched a numbered highway system to begin to unify the haphazard network of roads (Knowles, 2011) that left many a cross-country traveler either hopelessly lost or on roads that were poorly constructed. Prior to 1926, road construction was undertaken at a local or regional level and there was no consistency in construction or labeling of roads from area to area. By creating a federal

level project, regions that wanted to build new highways and qualify for federal funding, had to meet a variety of criteria for the quality of the road. In addition to building new roads, the new highway system also linked together existing routes that connected (more or less) and assigned all of the segments along one route a single unifying number (Knowles, 2011). Thus, the network of roads that led from Chicago to Los Angeles were given the number “66” and adorned with the classic black white shield-shaped signs.

The path between Chicago and Los Angeles, which closely paralleled the railroad lines (see Zeigler and Zeigler, 2013a, this volume) might have fallen into the relative obscurity of every other partial cross-country road had it not been for the Dust Bowl and the publication of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Steinbeck’s portrayal of the migration of people from the High Plains westward touched the American psyche. He was also the first person to term Route 66 as “the Mother Road.” The road might have faded back into obscurity again but for the



Photo courtesy of Kate Zeigler

writing and release of Bobby Troupe's song "(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66" just after the end of World War II. At the same time, Jack Rittenhouse published *A Guidebook to Highway 66 as Americans* began to travel more in the post-war era (Knowles, 2011).

During the late 1940s and the 1950s, Route 66 saw an increase in travelers along its length, whether they were coming and going for vacation, business or were moving. With this influx of people came the boom in businesses that were associated with the highway, including most of the now (in)famous tourist traps. During the late 1950s, a new cross-country highway system was beginning to develop, designed around the concept of a limited-access freeway system (Knowles, 2011). This spelled the death of the majority of small road-side businesses along Route 66 and other cross-country roads that were replaced with freeways. If a business was not located very close to the new on- or off-ramps, travelers could not (or would not) access them. Over time, the entire length of Route 66 was gradually replaced, and by June 27, 1985, the Mother Road was removed from the highway system. In New Mexico and Arizona, I-40 was the new corridor. The old pavement is still present and in many places has been recycled into town main streets or feeder road systems for the interstate.

Places to visit old Route 66 in between Flagstaff, Arizona and Grants, New Mexico are abundant. Old 66 runs along the train tracks immediately south of downtown Flagstaff and much of the vintage architecture is still present and in use. For example, the Hotel Monte Vista, which opened in January of 1927 (Knowles, 2011), is still open for business. Traveling east from Flagstaff, the next place to touch the Mother Road is the small community of Winona, mentioned by Bobby Troupe in his famous song. While there is not much to see, the old trestle bridge that was part of the highway is still present just north of the modern road. Once you are on I-40, the signs of old Route 66 are common. For example, the now abandoned tourism "complex" of Twin Arrows is just east of Flagstaff and still has the enormous metal arrows jutting out of the ground. Meteor City's geodesic dome, east of the exit for Meteor Crater, is another example of the unique architectural styles that sprang up along the old highway.

And who can forget Winslow, Arizona? Route 66 is the main street through Winslow and much of the old architecture from the boom days is still present. La Posada Hotel, originally constructed in 1928 as part of the Harvey House series (see Zeigler and Zeigler, 2013b, this volume), is very much the jewel of the town. The hotel was designed by renowned architect Mary Colter and was renovated in 1999 (Knowles, 2011). With its glamorous rooms, museum gallery spaces, and restaurant, La Posada is a destination for many travelers in the Southwest. East of Winslow, near Joseph City, stands the iconic billboard for Jackrabbit Trading Post with its simple logo and the famous slogan "Here It Is." This trading post built its business on the art of anticipation (Knowles, 2011) – small signs were posted

as much as 100 miles away that simply had the rabbit logo and the miles to go (e.g., "87 miles").

Just west of Petrified Forest National Park, is Holbrook, home of the famous Wig-Wam Village Motel, where you too can sleep in a "genuine" wig-wam. The motel was part of a set of seven "villages" built across the country, with the first constructed in Horse Cave, Kentucky and the last near San Bernadino, California (Knowles, 2011). Holbrook was among the last segments of Route 66 to be bypassed, which occurred in 1981, so the businesses that boast their ties to the old highway are still abundant (Hinckley, 2012). Between Holbrook and the state line is a string of slowly decomposing tourist attractions and small towns. In Houck, you can visit a replica of "Fort Courage," the fort that was the mainstay of the old television series *F Troop*. In Lupton, a whole series of brightly colored tourist traps lines the old highway.

In New Mexico, old Route 66 passed through Defiance and Manuelito, where the film *The Big Carnival* (1950) was filmed in the caves in the cliffs to the north of the highway. Gallup, the bustling town at the southern edge of the Navajo Nation, still boasts much of the original structures built along Route 66, which parallels the railroad through the center of town. El Rancho Hotel and Motel, "the world's largest ranch house," is the pride of the old highway in Gallup (Hinckley, 2012). With its vintage slogan "Charm of Yesterday and the Convenience of Tomorrow," the hotel is known for its impressive lobby décor and has named the rooms for the Hollywood star and personalities who stayed there in the 1940s and 1950s. El Rancho opened in December of 1937 and was the place to see and be seen until the late 1960s, when it began to decline. The hotel was closed and scheduled for demolition in 1987, but was bought and renovated by Armand Ortega (Hinckley, 2012). East of Gallup, the Mother Road passes through the small towns of Thoreau (originally named Mitchell), Prewitt and Bluewater. There are fewer of the old iconic tourist traps to be seen here, but some do exist, including the Route 66 Swap Meet between Prewitt and Bluewater. In Grants, Route 66 is the main drag (now named Santa Fe Ave.) and some of the old motels and other structures are still visible, although few are in use. Grants was a very small town from its founding in 1861 until the mining boom began. The coupling of the mining industry and the presence of Route 66 through the little community helped boost the population from around a hundred in the 1920s to over two thousand in the late 1940s (Hinckley, 2012).

Unlike most of the original cross-country highways that were replaced by the interstate system, Route 66 has refused to die. Many of the original motels and tourist havens are crumbling, but many more are maintained and still very much in use. While traveling the Mother Road has now become a trip through nostalgia for many, it is still very much an adventure and a uniquely American adventure at that.

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