

Route 66 History

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I first started driving (legally) when I was 16 years old in 1985 in Pennsylvania. For me, getting behind the wheel of a car and driving was the ultimate freedom. There was no better feeling than to leave the house and drive to visit friends or explore new parts of the countryside. The automobile and what it gives us is an important part of our culture. It allows us to escape and explore. The interesting part is little did I realize or understand that just as I was starting to drive, an important part of our culture in the United States was coming to an end. The decommissioning of Route 66 occurred less than a year before.

Of course, I had little understanding and did not care much at that age what Route 66 was. The honest reality is that I did not fully understand the actual history of this highway and what it meant to the culture of the United States until recently. Over the years, I have heard and seen countless references to the highway—from songs at car shows (“Get your kicks on Route 66...”) to photos of that era and signage hanging in people’s shops. The references to Route 66 are really all around us. But for many people, and those of my generation and beyond, we simply don’t know first-hand what it all means.

It’s hard to imagine a time when traveling across the USA did not mean driving on the major interstates, those great asphalt or concrete ribbons that keep our industries alive and cities connected. But imagine traveling across states if the interstates were closed or if they didn’t exist, just driving on minor roadways. Well, of course, at one time that’s exactly how the roads were. There was actually a time before interstates. And to understand that and appreciate it is to understand and appreciate Route 66.

The highway system grew and evolved as did the use and availability of automobiles. Before automobiles, there was only wagon roads. The first legislation for public highways was passed in 1925 when Congress enacted a plan to start building a national highway system. The actual original idea for a highway between Chicago and Los Angeles was created by Cyrus Avery of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and John Woodruff from Springfield, Missouri. They lobbied to have this specific route created and were essentially the founders of this highway. Route 66 was signed into law in 1927, then completed and paved about 10 years later in 1938 as one of the first national highways. From the beginning, the plan for this and many other highways was to connect the main streets of rural and urban cities with each other.

Route 66 covered a total of 2,448 miles, starting in Chicago and running through the states of Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona before finally ending at

Santa Monica, California. It roughly covers a diagonal cross section across the country to connect Chicago and the cities, towns, and states in between to the west coast. Since the route passed through many small towns, as the traffic grew so did the rise of readily accessible roadside businesses, service stations, restaurants, and “motels.” Many small towns saw thriving businesses and economies simply by the fact that Route 66 passed through and brought people with it.

Because of this, Route 66 started to shape or become a part of Americana. There certainly was an appeal to drive out as a family and see the west coast, and road trips like this became very popular. U.S. 66 received many nicknames like “The Great Diagonal Way,” “The Main Street of America,” “The Will Rogers Highway,” and lastly and most famously “The Mother Road” by John Steinbeck in his famous 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. A year later, John Ford immortalized Route 66 in the American consciousness when he made a movie of the book.

Today, only sections of the original Route 66 exist. You can find them marked in some cities and towns, but many sections were abandoned and are no longer referenced on any current maps. The demise of the once great Route 66 started in 1956 when President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Interstate Highway Act, allocating \$30 billion to create 40,000 miles of interstate highways throughout the United States to what we see today as the modern four-lane highway system. And unlike the early highways, the idea of the interstates was to completely bypass towns and not go through them as quick and efficient travel for the general population and military if needed (it was the time of the Cold War).

By 1970, most of Route 66 was not being used, and with that came the decline of the businesses and the economies associated with it. In some cases, entire communities became ghost towns and were abandoned until the highway was totally decommissioned in 1984. It was the rise and fall of a highway in a single lifetime.

Despite all of this, today there is once again a revival in the interest of this once famous Route 66. There are some good documentaries to watch and there is even an online forum I found where people post on or about Route 66. Many sections of the highway are now called “Historic Route 66” and several organizations have been started for the sake of preserving the highway and its historic features.

I would say to anyone who has the time and wants to experience what it was like years ago to drive a section. It is true Americana at its best. Only then you can start to appreciate what it all means.

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