

Geography In The News™



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ROUTE 66, A POP CULTURE ICON

On Nov. 11, 1926, U.S. Highway 66 became one of the original federal highways. Running from Chicago to Los Angeles, this highway became an icon for generations of western migrants and vacationers. Motor-ing along the route in the 1950s left millions with indelible memories of incredible physical and cultural sights.

Up until the early 1920s, roads throughout rural America were mostly dirt and gravel, usually poorly surfaced, not well marked and inadequately maintained. They essentially were a hodge-podge network of two-lane wagon roads. Early automobiles, including Henry Ford's Model T, had narrow, flimsy tires unsuited to long distance travel over such roads, particularly under wet or frozen conditions.

Cross-country auto travel was not just an adventure; it could be a harrowing and expensive undertaking. Most such travelers found rail transportation to be more accommodating and affordable in the early 1900s.

By the early 1920s, automobiles were becoming not only more plentiful and affordable, but more dependable as well. Demand for better roads began to accelerate, leading Congress to establish a federal route system that crossed multiple states.

With a wave of migrants headed for California in their automobiles over these unpaved roads, Route 66 was designed as a 2,448-mile (3,940-km) paved road crossing parts of eight states from Illinois to California. Still it wasn't until 1938 that the last of this road was paved.

When the stock market crashed in 1929 followed by the legendary Dust Bowl of the early 1930s, Route 66 became the pathway for fleeing migrants. Author John Steinbeck in his novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, labeled Route 66 as the "Mother Road," as he documented the mass

exodus of mostly destitute migrants to California from the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, Colorado and Texas. Others called it the "Will Rogers Highway" or "The Main Street of America."

In the 1940s, World War II military traffic found Route 66 to be immensely important in moving equipment and personnel between the East and West Coasts.

Following the end of the war in the mid-1940s, tourism along Route 66 boomed. Nat King Cole sang Bobby Troup's classic (Get Your Kicks On) *Route 66* and suddenly everybody knew about the highway.

Route 66 was a magnet to businesses catering to the traveling public. The popularity of the route attracted uniquely designed eating establishments, motor courts (later known as motels), filling stations (later known as gas or service stations), curio shops and specialty attractions to the highway. This huge array of businesses was unique and iconic to Route 66. Auto clubs, tourist bureaus, chambers of commerce, oil companies and businesses of all types advertised the highway as "a vacation in itself."

Like all things that grow uncontrolledly, Route 66 became congested in most of the towns and cities through which it passed. Although the business community complained, the road was straightened or expanded, towns were bypassed and newer, faster highways gradually replaced Route 66. Finally, in the late 1950s President Dwight Eisenhower signed into law the

Interstate Highway System, which marked the end of Route 66 as a major highway. In 1985, the highway was officially removed from the United States Highway System.

The major interstates today bypassing Route 66 are I-55 from Chicago to St. Louis, I-44 to Oklahoma City, I-40 to Barstow, Calif., I-15 to San Bernardino, Calif., and I-10 through Los Angeles. It is still possible to follow parts of old Route 66, sometimes on renumbered roads. In fact, some Route 66 admirers and aficionados assemble caravans to follow most of the remaining route from Chicago to Los Angeles, requiring careful planning with many detours. The latest major publicity about the highway occurred in the 2006 Disney-Pixar film *Cars*, where a map shown to Lightning McQueen indicated that I-40 had bypassed the fictitious town of Radiator Springs located on Route 66.

To those who fondly remember the Route 66 of yesteryear or to those with an interest in Americana, there is even a website for planning a trip along the remnants of the road (www.historic66.com). Just visiting the remnants today brings great memories flooding back of past road trips along this iconic highway for many.

And that is *Geography in the News™*, December 2, 2011. #1122.

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Historical Route 66



Sources: Lineback, Neal, personal travel (1953-2011); <http://www.historic66.com>; and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cars>