

New Mexico's Historic Route 66



*Okies Headin' West, by Dorothea Lange
(Courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USF34-16681)*

If one delirious post-World War II definition of freedom was being able to get in your car, turn on the ignition and go anywhere you wanted to, then Route 66 offered an asphalt of independence from the wind-buffed shores of Lake Michigan in Chicago to the balmy beaches of the Pacific in Santa Monica.

Hundreds of businesses played a part in this 2,448-mile road show. For the scores of communities it once serviced in eight states, it was the Main Street of America.

Although it began in 1926, old '66 is remembered for the way it fueled America in the '40s and '50s.

It offered its own high-octane brand of manifest destiny. First came the penniless, dust-choked Okies, escaping in rattletrap roadsters in the '30s. They came to life as the Joads, clattering California-bound on "...the mother road, the road of flight" in a cut-down Hudson Super-Six in John Steinbeck's epic 1939 novel, "The Grapes of Wrath":

"Tom, they's a hunderds of families like us all a-goin' west. It's like they was runnin' away from soldiers... like the whole country was movin'."

After World War II, the entire country seemed to be doing just that, fueled by tens of thousands of ex-GIs who longed for a look at what America held in store for them.

Paved since 1937, that shimmering highway beckoned. Bedazzled, they took off for the Promised Land just beyond the setting sun.

Bobby Troup understood the rhythm of the road. Headed for a music career in 1946, the Pennsylvanian left Harrisburg in his green '41 Buick convertible, slipping onto Route 66 in the Windy City. He arrived in Los Angeles a couple of weeks later with a song whose catchy lyrics Nat King Cole quickly crooned into a hit that became the anthem of the asphalt.

"If you ever plan to motor west, take my way, the highway that's the best. Get your kicks on Route 66."

Those long trips west brought the country a new vocabulary. Tourist courts. Refrigerated air. Curio shops. Greasy spoons. Last chance gas. Burma Shave signs. Truck stops. Motels. As the heartbeat of America accelerated into the '60s, so did the volume and speed of the nation's automobiles, and the commensurate need for a vast, national network of bigger, faster highways.

Route 66 enjoyed a revival of sorts when actors Martin Milner and George Maharis hopped into a beige '59 Corvette and drove Tod and Buzz and that long, glorious highway into American living rooms every Friday night on television from 1960-64.

But by then the tentacles of a new Federal interstate highway system were taking over. When the last segment was decommissioned in 1984, Route 66 slipped into history.

New Mexico's share of '66 history is as intriguing.

The earliest route was a circuitous, 501-mile washboard journey in 1926. Westbound motorists encountered Glenrio, then Tucumcari. Past Santa Rosa, they turned north, then at Romero (later Romeroville), west. In Santa Fe they turned southwest, passing through Albuquerque to Los Lunas. There they turned northwest to Correo, then west to Grants and Gallup.

They found the route 126 miles shorter in 1938. Instead of turning northwest past Santa Rosa, they continued west through Buford (later Moriarty) and Albuquerque, all the way to Correo.

As these motorists traveled through New Mexico, they encountered live rattlesnakes, teepees and turquoise jewelry, sagebrush and tumbleweeds, hogans and Harvey Houses, real Indians, blue skies and unending sunshine. Some of them traveled no further. In New Mexico, some of them realized they had come home.



HISTORIC ROUTE 66

Westbound motorists can take a 20-mile gravel stretch of the old highway from **Glenrio to San Jon**, which harbored the last active segment of '66 in the state before I-40 intervened in 1982.

From San Jon, a nearly continuous 24-mile paved chunk of vintage '66 continues all the way to **Tucumcari**. Along Tucumcari Boulevard, the city's five-mile claim to '66 fame, you'll enjoy a '40s and '50s flavor. You'll find the **Cactus Motor Lodge**, then the legendary **Blue Swallow Motel** and **Teepee Curios**, then the **Westerner Drive-In**, **Lasso Motel**, **Pine Lodge**, **Palomino and Travelodge Motels**, **Del's Restaurant**, **Town House and Safari Motels**, **Sahara Sands Motel & Restaurant**, **Dick's Auto Service**, **Pow Wow Restaurant**, **Buckaroo Motel**, **Redwood Lodge**, and **Paradise Motel**.

In **Santa Rosa**, Will Rogers Drive is the city's four-mile soliloquy to '66. It passes **The Club Cafe**, a land-mark since 1935.

About 43 miles west on I-40, you'll climb **Palma Hill**, spot 7,576-foot high **Cerro Pedernal** to the

southwest, and reach **Cline's Corners**, a rubber-tom-ahawk that has lured motorists since 1934. Business in its cedar-scented gift shop of rattlesnake ash-rays, beaded belts and objets de brick-a-brack, is brisk.

In **Moriarty** is another three-mile parabola of pavement. Along NM 333 you'll spot the former **Bufford Courts** and **Sands Motels**, **Blackie's Restaurant**, and the onetime **Yucca**, **Cactus** and **Lariat Motels**.

In metropolitan Albuquerque, Central Avenue is an 18-mile ode to the asphalt. Start at the **State Fairgrounds**, a landmark since 1936. Then, in an architectural sampler of art deco and Pueblo revival, you'll discover, sequentially, the **De Anza Motel**, **Royal Motor Inn**, **Town Lodge Motel**, and **Aztec Motel** (originally the Aztec Motorcourt), all built in the '30s, 15-block long **Nob Hill**, built in 1936-47, and the **Lobo Theater** and **Lobo Pharmacy & Bookstore** (originally Barber's El Rancho Market), both built in the '30s.

Downtown are several buildings that once defined the skyline: the **Sunshine Building** (built in

1923-24), **First National Bank Building** (1922), **Rosenwald Building** (1910), and **KiMo Theater** (1927). Also note **Maisel's** (circa 1940) and, west of Old Town, the **El Vado Motel** (1937).

If you'd like to retrace a leg of the 1926 route, head north on I-25. Take the **Algodones** exit and re-turn south via NM 313, the original '66 masquerading as Fourth Street, **Isleta Boulevard** and NM 314. You'll go 46 miles from **Algodones** south through historic **Bernalillo**, past **Sandia** and **Isleta Pueblos**.

In **Los Lunas**, turn west onto Main Street. You'll pass a stately restaurant, the **Luna Mansion**, built in 1881. Stay on NM 6. It's 33 miles of historic highway all the way to **Correo** (once known as **Suwanee**). **Correo** is also 33 miles west of Albuquerque via I-40.

At **Mesita** old '66 reappears as NM 124, slithering 25 miles through **Laguna**, **New Laguna**, **Paraje**, **Budville**, **Cubero**, and **McCartys**. **Cubero** once had the **Villa de Cubero Tourist Courts & Cafe**, built in 1937. Famed for serving succulent portions of lamb, it welcomed Ernest Hemingway as he worked on

"The Old Man & the Sea", and several Hollywood film crews shooting on location.

In **Grants**, old '66 is Santa Fe Avenue. Its six-mile segment is right out of the '40s: the **Franciscan Lodge**, the **Grants Restaurant**, where Hollywood stars **Jayne Mansfield** and **Tab Hunter** once stopped for green chile cheeseburgers, the **Golden 50's Cafe** (originally the **Uranium Cafe**), and **Monte Carlo Restaurant**.

The original highway reemerges near **Iyanbito** as a 13-mile introduction to **Gallup**. Along the city's nine-mile segment are **Earl's Restaurant**, built in 1947, and the **El Rancho Hotel** (1936), home to a galaxy of Hollywood stars when Gallup was a Western film capital from 1929-64. Then look for the onetime **Drake Hotel** (1919), **Santa Fe Railroad Depot** (1923), the former **White Cafe** (1928), **Richardson's Trading Post**, the old **Palace and Rex Hotels** (both circa 1900), and **Virgie's Restaurant** (1950).

The final 16 miles of old '66 continues west from Gallup as NM 118 to Arizona.

Recommended Reading

Hilleson, K., & D. Nakii
Route Sixty-Six Revisited: A Wanderer's Guide to New Mexico
Albuquerque: D. Nakii Enterprises, 1988.

Noe, Sally
Greetings from Gallup, Six Decades of Route 66
Gallup Downtown Development Group, 1991

Moore, Robert
The Mother Road Journal
PO Box 27232, Lakewood CO 80227
4/year newspaper (\$10)

Rittenhouse, Jack D.
A Guide Book to Highway 66
Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989.

Schneider, Jill & D. Nakii
Route 66 Across New Mexico: A Wanderer's Guide
Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991.

Scott, Quinta & Susan Croce Kelly
Route 66: The Highway & Its People
Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.

Snyder, Tom
**A Route 66 Traveler's Guide:
A Roadside Companion**
New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

Taylor, Paul
Route 66 Magazine
PO Box 2569
Bullhead City, AZ 86430
4/year magazine (\$12)

Teague, Tom
Searching for 66
Springfield: Tom Teague, 1208 West Edwards, Springfield
IL 62704, 1991.

Wallis, Michael
Route 66, the Mother Road
New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.

State Information

New Mexico Department of Tourism
PO Box 20003
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87503
(800/545-2040)

Local Information

Albuquerque Convention & Visitor Bureau
PO Box 26866, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87125
(505/243-3696 or 800/284-2282).

Bernalillo Chamber of Commerce
PO Box 1776, Bernalillo, New Mexico 87004
(505/867-4689).

Cibola County Chamber of Commerce
PO Box 297, Grants, New Mexico 87020
(505/287-4802 or 800/748-2142).

Gallup Convention & Visitor Bureau
PO Box 600, Gallup, New Mexico 87305
(505/863-3841 or 800/242-4282).

Los Lunas Chamber of Commerce
PO Box 13, Los Lunas, New Mexico 87031
(505/865-1581).

Moriarty Chamber of Commerce
PO Box 96, Moriarty, New Mexico 87035
(505/832-6446).

Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce
486 Parker Avenue, Santa Rosa, New Mexico
88435 (505/472-3763).

Tucumcari Chamber of Commerce
PO Drawer E, Tucumcari, New Mexico 88401
(505/461-1694)

New Mexico Route 66 Association

Founded in 1989, the nonprofit association addresses history and preservation issues, and supports a variety of commemorative and educational activities, publishes a quarterly newsletter and sells souvenir items. For membership information, contact the association at 1415 Central Ave. NE, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87106 (505/246-0211)

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