

# A Postcard From Route 66

by JAKE WARGA

October 13, 2009

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Years ago, before the interstates came along, US Route 66 was a highway that connected Chicago to Los Angeles. Then it became a rock 'n' roll song, a TV show and now a brand of clothing.

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ROBERT SIEGEL, host:

This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Robert Siegel.

Years ago, before the interstates came along, Route 66 was the highway that connected Chicago to Los Angeles. It became a rock and roll song, a TV show, and now even a brand of clothing that you can buy at Kmart. Independent producer Jake Warga wandered along a portion of the highway to see what it's like these days.

JAKE WARGA: Roads have had a huge influence in shaping New Mexico, most famously, Route 66, also called the mother road, for it gave birth to the American highway. Before 1937, Route 66 went through Santa Fe, so it seemed like a good place to start. Plus, I was hungry.

Mr. ROCKY DURHAM (Santa Fe School of Cooking): Pico de gallo means beak of the rooster. So today, anyhow, we're going to be making a grilled pineapple salsa, a roasted tomato salsa and a tomatillo salsa.

WARGA: Rocky Durham is teaching a salsa-making class at the Santa Fe School of Cooking.

Mr. DURHAM: Caramelized and black flecks of tomato skin in there. That's kind of what I want to see.

WARGA: Santa Fe is also having a birthday, even older than the country it's in.

Mr. DURHAM: We're going to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the nation's oldest capital for the next 16 months.

Never touch anything sensitive or a lover after handling chilies unless you're into that kind of thing. But...

(Soundbite of laughter)

WARGA: Next stop: Albuquerque.

Mr. RANDY ROGERS(ph): Route 66 came from Chicago to L.A. through Albuquerque.

Unidentified Man #1: Yeah, just five miles an hour is all...

WARGA: I found the best way to see Albuquerque is from a hot air balloon.

What's the altitude now?

Mr. ROGERS: A thousand feet.

WARGA: But it's not as peaceful as you think, drifting gently in the sky. Try talking to someone who now and then triggers a ferocious flamethrower right over your head. Randy Rogers with Rainbow Riders is our pilot.

Mr. ROGERS: The name pilot comes from Pilatre de Rozier, the first aeronaut to fly, which was in a hot air balloon in 1783. That's where the name pilot came from.

WARGA: Looking down on Albuquerque from 1,000 feet is looking at history. Once a vast desert, you can see the original town on the east side of the Rio Grande and then see how the city expanded across the river with newer bridges, roads, buildings and suburbs.

Mr. ROGERS: It used to be a lot of open space, which is still true somewhat, but not near as much as it used to be. None of that on the west side, you know, that's all within the last 35, 40 years.

WARGA: Gentle winds glide us over a vast, new housing development, but fresh cul-de-sacs lead to smooth, empty dirt lots where virgin pipes yawn to be connected. From up high, you can see where the recent housing bubble burst, how the land was shaped by man's financial whimsy.

There is one house on the corner of the tract all alone - a gigantic McMansion-like house that must've been the model unit.

Mr. ROGERS: They started that development, but it stopped. In fact, they were trying to sell that one on the corner here for about two years now. Some sort of a mansion.

(Soundbite of beeping)

WARGA: Is that detecting a missile or what?

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. ROGERS: No, it's letting me know that I'm going down real fast.

WARGA: Randy sets us down in a recently harvested field. Actually, set down is too gentle a word. The landing was fun.

(Soundbite of laughter)

WARGA: And we helped plow a bit of the field for the next harvest until our bubble deflated.

Are we there yet?

Unidentified Woman: Congratulations.

WARGA: Further west along 66 is Sky City, where the Acoma Native Americans run a highway casino and road stop. None of this would be here without the highway. It started as a trading post along historic 66, but what about before the highway?

Mr. DARRELL PHILIPPI(ph): (Singing foreign language)

WARGA: I met Darrell Philippi, a member of the Acoma tribe, an elder and singer.

Mr. PHILIPPI: My father and his grandfathers were all singers. And that song was saying that a long time ago we came from the north and started migrating to the south.

WARGA: Off the highway on top of a tall mesa is the actual Acoma Pueblo. I found that the farther you get from the highway, the more beautiful things become. Mainly mud and straw homes, the Acoma Pueblo was once mistaken for gold.

Mr. PHILIPPI: Coronado looking for the Seven Cities of Gold, Acoma being one of the stops, so he believed that was gold. Our villages in the evening, when the sun sets, they actually glisten, whether it's from the mica windows or whatever it was, but the village actually glows at night. So I could see why he believed that these cities were made of gold.

Unidentified Man #2: Remember, though, man has survived a remarkably radioactive environment.

WARGA: I drive next through the town of Grants. There's a Wal-Mart near the new highway. Otherwise, this stretch of 66 is mainly abandoned motels.

(Soundbite of recording)

Mr. VAN(ph): My name is Van. I've been working in and around the mining industry here in the Grants area since 1960.

WARGA: Except, deep beneath the town's chamber of commerce.

(Soundbite of recording)

Mr. GEORGE: My name is George.

WARGA: There's a giant mining museum - an actual life-size reconstruction of a local uranium mine.

(Soundbite of recording)

Mr. BILL: My name is Bill. I've spent all my working life all in uranium, mostly here in the Grants area.

WARGA: Out-of-body voices like ghosts come out of speakers from each info-station.

(Soundbite of recording)

Unidentified Man #2: The steer chute being illuminated were used by the (unintelligible)...

WARGA: The only other tourists I came across was a resident of Grants here with their kids.

Ms. DOLORES DOLMENE(ph): My name's Dolores Dolmene. When the mining was booming, oh, my gosh, you should've seen this town.

(Soundbite of recording)

Unidentified Man #3: The broken material was then removed by a mucking machine shown here.

Ms. DOLMENE: I handled workers compensation cases for the state of New Mexico, and we took care of a lot of the miners.

(Soundbite of recording)

Unidentified Man #4: And I've had 30 years in mining experience.

Ms. DOLMENE: You noticed at the Wal-Mart over here, they have one of those 18-wheeler tractor truck trailers that takes care of them, and they have kind of like a traveling unit there to still care for some of the miners.

(Soundbite of recording)

Unidentified Man #5: Nuclear energy can provide a long-term solution to a world hungry for the good life.

WARGA: The last stop on Route 66 in New Mexico is Gallup.

Mr. ARMEN ORTEGA(ph): The hotel was built in 1936.

WARGA: Armen Ortega owns one of the few still-operating historic hotels, the El Rancho, right on the highway.

Mr. ORTEGA: Historic Route 66, that's right.

WARGA: Armen, 81, has been here a while.

Mr. ORTEGA: Everybody was going to California, traveling in a truck with their washtubs and chickens and the kids barefooted, you know. They were poor people going to pick grapes in California. Yeah, I remember that.

WARGA: Back in the day, so many spaghetti westerns were shot in the area that each creepily preserved room is named after forgotten, desaturated movie stars, save for one.

Mr. ORTEGA: Ronald Reagan stayed here at least two times a year. Oh yeah, he was always a lieutenant in the cavalry, kill all the Indians, us kids, yay. But today we yell the other way.

WARGA: In fact, Armen grew up with the Indians.

Mr. ORTEGA: Oh, yeah, I can speak perfect Navajo. I learned as a kid. (Speaking foreign language)

WARGA: I asked him to introduce himself in Navajo.

MR. ORTEGA: (Speaking foreign language)

WARGA: Leaving New Mexico on 66, I realized the route is a ghost tour through the American way of life, how we treated the land, the people, our obsession with going west, our love affair with energy and automobiles. It's a tour through wide, empty streets, crumbling hotels, gaping, abandoned mines, burst housing bubbles.

Most drivers now zip by the past on the newer highway, 40, at frightening speeds, too fast to see the dusty history out the side windows. It's worth driving slowly on any remains of old Highway 66 to see where we've been and where we might be headed at such dangerous speeds.

(Soundbite of music)

SIEGEL: Some scenes along Route 66 from independent producer Jake Warga.

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**David DeLang (dsdelang)** wrote:

Mr. Rogers was pulling your leg about the derivation of the word "pilot". It is much older than the Montgolfier Bros. balloon. Ships had pilots on the water long before M. de Rozier was a passenger in the balloon.

Wednesday, October 14, 2009 9:56:38 AM

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