

Old Routes, New Trails

In the 1850's, primary means of transportation were the steam boat, the railroad, the horse and to a large extent, walking. The tracks, often impassable, always uncomfortable. Then came the automobile, our personal chariots. They transformed our society into a group of gasoline powered nomads; pavement followed the cars. Urban development followed the pavement, and our cities grew up on the interstate highways that served them. Americans have always worshiped the automobile--the power, the individuality, the freedom. And nothing signifies that freedom like an old icon from the days when automobiles were young—Route 66.

Cars are more than they appear. They're fashion, status, and they define who we are, or who we perceive ourselves to be. And best of all, they get us down the road; and everybody knows, it's the road that we really love.

Americans have always been going somewhere, and the road is where it happens. It's a part of our mythology. The all-night diners, the neon signs, waitresses with that bottomless cup of black coffee. There's nothing more American than the dream of the open road.

And the one road that symbolizes that dream more than any other, ran right through Missouri—Route 66.

Route 66 has been called the Mother Road; the Main Street of America, and for many years, during the 1930's and 40's, it was. A continuous link between the Mid-West and Pacific states, it brought our huge country together, and changed us a bit in the process. It's really a collection of state roads, the designation US 66 was formerly assigned at a meeting of state and federal highway officials in 1926. Route 66, the road, and the mythology were born. Here's how Michael Wallace, the author of "Route 66, the Mother Road," described this icon of American culture:

The highway would wind out of mighty Chicago, and traverse the gently rolling Illinois farmland, where the soil was the color of licorice. In Missouri, the road would closely track the old Osage Indian trail, and the Wire Road, in cut across the state in a southwesterly direction. The highway would briefly caress the Kansas prairie before marching across the oil fields and ranch lands of Oklahoma. It would continue across the Texas panhandle, climb the steep plateaus and mountains of New Mexico and Arizona, and cross the desert of southern California on its way to the pacific coast.

When the highway was designated in 1926, it wasn't really a continuous road, it was a collection of state highways in various states of repair. Only 800 of the routes 2400 miles were paved. The rest were rocky, rutted and in some places the road was covered with planks, to allow for the passage of Henry Ford's Model T's. But the vision of a road was there. A national road linking east and west, and the pavement followed the vision.

By the mid 1930's a continuous paved, two-lane road, stretched from Chicago to the Pacific Ocean, and unforeseen by the highway's designers, it became more than just a road, it became a cultural icon.

Well, they call it the Mother Road. It represents a step back in time, when things weren't so fast. When you could enjoy yourself, you could take your time. It represents a more leisurely pace of life, and I think that's a lot of what Route 66 is about. Route 66 State Park is a state park that is 409 acres, that is built where the former Times Beach was, the former city of Times Beach. And, the former resort of Times Beach before the city even became into existence. It's the only park on Route 66 across the whole country. And we are right on Route 66. Route 66 runs right in front of our door, and the old Route 66 bridge goes across, to go into the park.

(car noise)

This is Route 66 in Missouri. About 300 miles passing through 10 Missouri counties. From the Chain of Rocks Bridge crossing the Mississippi in the east, to the last truck stop west of Joplin, the old highway defines an America that used to be.

The automobile and the ensuing roads changed everything. Our cities, our architecture, even the way we ate. And Route 66 captured the excitement of all this change when it was new. Take the Coral Courts for example.

Constructed in 1941, these stylish, tile buildings seemed right at home with the smooth curves of the automobiles of the day. Built by a colorful entrepreneur, Johnny Carr, along Route 66, in the small village of Marlborough near St. Louis. The Coral Courts developed an equally colorful reputation. Part of the charm of these unique buildings and also a part of their notoriety were the built in garages attached to each unit. Patrons could stay at the motel with complete anonymity. Made with hollow ceramic blocks, coated with a thick glossy veneer, these art deco cottages were built to last a lifetime. Unfortunately, they did not. The coming of the interstate, urbanization, and a variety of other factors led to the demolition of these strange artifacts of a by-gone era.

Another part of Missouri's Route 66 legacy is Meramec Caverns near Stanton, Missouri. Again, it was an interesting entrepreneur that brought the cave into national prominence. Lester Dill acquired the cave in the early 1930's and began a program of unabashed promotion and publicity. He had barns throughout the country painted, advertising his cave. He claimed Jesse James used the cave as a hideout, and to bolster his claim, he introduced a man who said he was Jesse James. Dill was described as a self-styled cave-ologist, promoter of the PT Barnum School, and a quiet benefactor of both causes and persons in need. He knew a good thing when he saw it, and Dill opened his air-conditioned cave to the hundreds of motorists traveling down Route 66, setting a new standard for advertising in the process. The cave is still open today, a natural wonder steeped in the lore of the old road.

In the 1940's and early 1950's the reputation of Route 66 began to fade. Increasing numbers of travelers and constant road construction, led to an increase in serious automobile accidents. The term "Bloody 66" was used to describe many of the sections of the road.

In Washington, there was a new movement beginning. To create a new interstate highway system. Patterned after the German autobahns, these new limited access four-lane highways would be safer and allow travelers to drive at a greater rate of speed. But the very nature of the limited access interstate would destroy the cultural aspects of travel that had become part of our way of life. Here in Missouri as interstate 44 by-passed many parts of the old Route 66, many businesses were left stranded. Motels and cafes served what were now lonely access roads. The era of America's Main Street had come to an end.

The old road was gone, but not forgotten. Citizen's groups were formed to protect the legacy of the old road. Some buildings were saved and signs bearing the old Route 66 designation began to reappear in communities throughout the state. The legend of the mother road was just too important to be forgotten. Route 66, it's a part of your Missouri heritage.