

NARRATIVES OF THE MOTHER ROAD: GEOGRAPHIC THEMES ALONG ROUTE 66*

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ABSTRACT. One of the most culturally significant roads in the world, U.S. Highway 66 (commonly referred to as Route 66) has connected Chicago and Los Angeles since 1926. In order to explore what heritage themes Route 66 sites convey to tourists, we assessed the information presented to visitors at nearly four-dozen museums and interpretive sites astride the road using the qualitative software Nvivo 10. Five themes dominate interpretation. Route 66 thematically flows east to west with Chicago as the beginning and Los Angeles as the end of the road. Mobility and personal freedom of movement via the automobile are encapsulated in the history of the road. In addition, Route 66 highlights nostalgia for the 1950s with classic American automobiles, music of the era, and neon lights representing this golden age of the highway. Economic decline, and often the economic continuity of communities, is frequently found in interpretive materials. Finally, Route 66 museums are repositories of community memory as oral histories preserve the narratives of individuals and families who owned businesses on and lived near the road for multiple decades. We conclude with several observations about interpretive themes that are overlooked as well as regional differences in the geography of memory along Route 66. *Keywords:* commemorative landscapes, geography of memory, heritage tourism, Route 66.

Connecting Chicago to Los Angeles, Route 66 is a symbol of American identity, a pilgrimage site for personal voyages of self-discovery, as well as an economic resource for local communities, nonprofit organizations, and government entities who have opened a series of museums and interpretive sites near the highway. A recent study noted the annual direct economic impact of Route 66 is about \$132 million with an economic multiplier effect of \$262 million, including 2,400 jobs created along the roadway (Listokin and others 2011). Both Americans and international tourists alike drive sections of Route 66, stop at roadside attractions, visit historic and interpretive sites, and meet the colorful personalities along the road. For many, Route 66 is a reflection of American culture and a window into the past.

In 1926, Federal officials designated U.S. Highway 66 (commonly called Route 66). The road was a 2,400-mile diagonal route that connected Chicago, St. Louis, Tulsa, and Oklahoma City before turning west towards Amarillo, Albuquerque, and Los Angeles. As states paved sections of the road, boosters quickly promoted the highway as the “Main Street of America” (Wallis 2001; Cassity 2004; Dedek 2007). Periods of boom and bust followed.

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By the mid-1930s, Highway 66 became a road of economic desperation as Dust Bowl migrants moved to the West Coast. John Steinbeck captured the essence of this movement when he described Okies funneling “into 66 from the tributary side roads, from the wagon tracks and the rutted country roads. 66 is the mother road, the road of flight” (Steinbeck 1939, 151). After World War II ended, tourism along 66 increased as the road acted as the main corridor connecting the Midwest and Southern California. Businesses vied to provide increased services to consumers and large neon signs attempted to woo customers away from competing businesses (Scott and Kelly 1988; Dedek 2007). The post-World War II euphoria surrounding Route 66 was captured by the hit song “(Get Your Kicks On) Route 66,” written by Bobby Troup and first recorded by Nat “King” Cole in 1946. Complete with references to major cities along the highway, Cole’s hip, jazz-infused interpretation of the road anthem helped to make Route 66 an American cultural icon (Krim 2006).

The post-World War II euphoria surrounding Route 66 ended when state and federal officials formulated plans to replace the road with interstate highways. The new four-lane, limited-access super slabs were built in sections over the next several decades and portions of Route 66 were either dismantled or marginalized as access roads, while businesses astride the highway stagnated (Scott and Kelly 1988; Ross 2011). Ironically, during this transition Route 66 gained additional notoriety thanks to the weekly CBS television show *Route 66*. Millions followed the escapades of Tod and Buz as they drove around the country in a new Corvette convertible while completing good deeds and making difficult moral decisions (Krim 2006).

After the federal government decertified Route 66 as a functioning roadway in 1985, nostalgia quickly grew and the highway cemented its place as an iconic national symbol (Krim 2006). Today, Route 66 remains firmly entrenched in the American imagination and the road has been introduced to a new generation thanks to the success of the 2006 animated Pixar film *Cars*. Because of the emergence of Route 66 as an American cultural icon and an economic resource, nonprofit entities, state governments, and individuals have operated a series of museums and historic sites near the highway.

This study analyzes how interpretive sites in the eight states Route 66 passes through—Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California—portray the history of the road to tourists (Figure 1). While we were interested in uncovering regional differences in historical memory, we primarily looked for themes that transcended regional classification and unified the tourist experience along Route 66. It was not our intention to assess how effectively these images were conveyed to tourists, what perceptions visitors took from the case study sites, nor analyze any interpretation related to non-Route 66 themes. We assessed all written and pictorial information regarding the highway at the forty-six historic sites and museums along Route 66 sponsored by private nonprofit, local, state, or federal organizations and were typi-

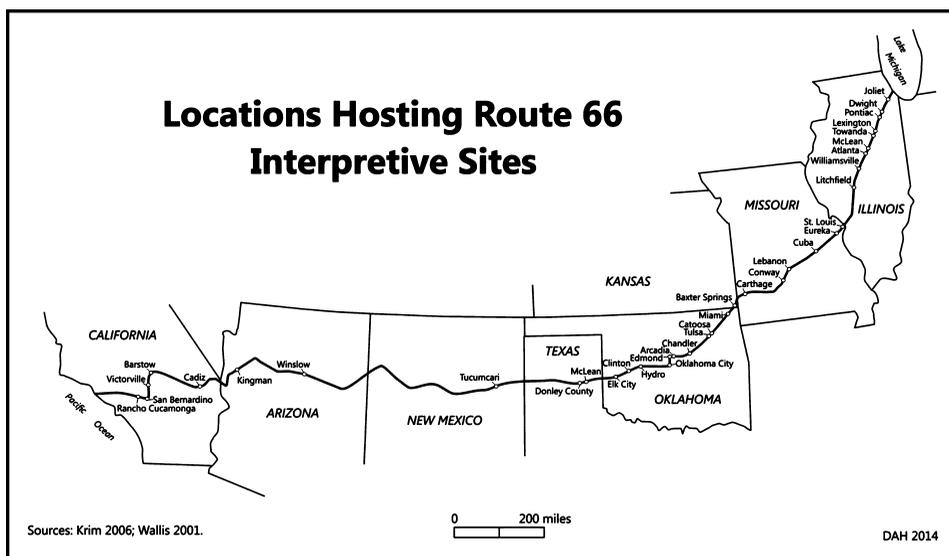


FIG. 1—Locator map of Route 66 with communities hosting museums and interpretive sites included in this study.

Sources: Krim 2006; Wallis 2000. (Cartography by Douglas A. Hurt).

cally included in the primary guidebooks published for tourists (Table 1).¹ Interpretation ranged from detailed historical markers at businesses to museums with 10,000 square feet of exhibit space. Historic signs, imagery, and other displays that did not present original interpretation (including reproductions of previously published articles, murals, and assorted memorabilia) to tourists were omitted from our study. In addition, we excluded privately owned tourist sites filled with kitsch, special-interest sites with minimal Route 66 interpretation, and inaccessible facilities with infrequent business hours or that were closed for renovation.

ROUTE 66, HERITAGE TOURISM, AND COMMEMORATIVE LANDSCAPES

Due in part to the notoriety from multiple decades of popular culture promotion, Route 66 has been the focus of frequent recent investigations by cultural geographers and other social scientists (as well as a plethora of nonacademic work documenting the road, most notably Wallis 2001). After publishing a series of articles and book chapters (1990, 1991, 1994, 1998), geographer Arthur Krim completed the definitive geographic account, a book-length account of the history of the road's construction, utilization as the primary transportation corridor to the West, and subsequent evolution into an American cultural icon represented in literature, film, music, and art (2006). A detailed cultural history by Peter Dedek focused on the road's unique place in American popular culture and significance of the symbolic imagery surrounding the highway (2007). Additional Route 66 research has revolved around increasing economic

TABLE 1—INTERPRETATIVE THEMES FOUND AT FORTY-SIX ROUTE 66 HERITAGE SITES*

ROUTE 66 SITES	EAST TO WEST	ECONOMIC HISTORY	COMMUNITY MEMORY	1950S NOSTALGIA	AUTOMOBILITY
Illinois					
Route 66 Park, Joliet				X	X
Joliet Area Historical Museum and Route 66 Welcome Center, Joliet	X	X	X	X	X
Ambler's-Becker's Texaco Service Station, Dwight		X	X		
Illinois Route 66 Hall of Fame and Museum, Pontiac	X	X	X	X	X
Lexington Route 66 Park, Lexington	X	X	X		X
A Geographical Journey Parkway, Towanda	X	X	X		X
Dixie Travel Plaza, McLean	X	X		X	X
Atlanta Museum, Atlanta	X	X	X		X
Atlanta Route 66 Park, Atlanta		X			X
Bunyon's Statue, Atlanta		X		X	X
Williamsville Historical Marker, Williamsville		X	X	X	X
Ariston Café, Litchfield		X	X		
Missouri					
Chain of Rocks Bridge, St. Louis					X
Route 66 State Park, Eureka	X	X	X	X	X
Crawford County Historical Society & Museum, Cuba		X	X		
Route 66 Museum and Research Center, Lebanon	X	X	X	X	X
Missouri Route 66 Welcome Center rest stop, westbound I-44, Conway	X	X	X	X	X
Missouri Route 66 Welcome Center rest stop, eastbound I-44, Conway	X	X	X	X	X
Jasper County Courthouse, Carthage	X	X	X	X	X
Powers Museum, Carthage	X		X		X
Kansas					
Baxter Springs Heritage Center and Museum, Baxter Springs	X	X	X	X	X
Route 66 Visitors Center, Baxter Springs			X		
Oklahoma					
Dobson Museum, Miami	X	X			
Blue Whale, Catoosa			X		
Meadow Gold Plaza, Tulsa		X	X	X	
Route 66 Interpretive Plaza, Tulsa	X	X		X	X

(continued)

TABLE 1—CONTINUED

ROUTE 66 SITES	EAST TO WEST	ECONOMIC HISTORY	COMMUNITY MEMORY	1950S NOSTALGIA	AUTOMOBILITY
Cyrus Avery Memorial Bridge and Centennial Plaza, Tulsa	X	X	X		X
Chandler Route 66 Interpretive Center, Chandler	X	X		X	X
The Museum of Pioneer History, Chandler	X	X	X	X	X
Old Round Barn, Arcadia		X	X		X
Edmond Historical Society Museum, Edmond	X	X	X	X	X
Route 66 Park, Oklahoma City	X	X	X	X	X
Lucille's Service Station, Hydro	X		X		
Oklahoma Route 66 Museum, Clinton	X	X	X	X	X
National Route 66 Museum, Elk City	X			X	
Texas					
Texas Route 66 Museum, McLean	X	X	X	X	X
I-40 Donley County Texas Route 66 Safety Rest Area, Donley County	X	X	X	X	X
New Mexico					
Tucumcari Historical Museum, Tucumcari	X	X		X	X
Arizona					
Old Trails Museum, Winslow	X	X	X		X
La Posada Hotel, Winslow (Journeys to Winslow exhibit)		X	X	X	X
Powerhouse Visitors Center, Kingman	X	X	X	X	X
California					
Cadiz Summit Rest Area, Cadiz	X	X			X
Route 66 Mother Road Museum, Barstow	X	X	X	X	X
California Route 66 Museum, Victorville	X	X	X	X	X
McDonalds-Route 66 Museum, San Bernardino		X	X	X	X
Route 66 Trailhead, Rancho Cucamonga					X

*The sites are listed in east-to-west order. The only interpretive sites excluded astride Route 66 were large collections with a state or regional concentration, facilities with a focus that predated U.S. Highway 66, museums with a narrow emphasis on an individual or topic, or temporary exhibits. As well, several interpretive sites commonly advertised in Route 66 publications were closed due to renovation or decay during our study period.

promotion and historic preservation in Illinois (Sculle 1994), the use of repeat photography to document landscape change in Needles, California (Merriam 1999), the evolution of branding and promotion themes relating to the highway (Carden 2006), the presentation of authentic and idealized Route 66 media texts (Wood 2010), and the historic impact of Route 66 on American Indian communities in New Mexico (Kelley and Reynolds 2010).

Several scholars have focused on the linkages between heritage tourism and Route 66. These studies include investigation of how web sites (both official and personal) promote Route 66 tourism (Kibby 2000), a comparison of how well popular-culture representations of the road reinforce tourist experiences posted on the Internet (Grubisic 2012), an exploration of how Route 66 became more relevant as a cultural symbol instead of a transportation artery (Nodelman 2007), and the analysis of heritage themes presented at Route 66 historic sites in Oklahoma (Hurt and others 2012). As well, a thorough analysis of the tourist experiences of nine Route 66 travelers determined that visitors placed minimal emphasis on nostalgia, but valued historical insight, driving experiences on a two-lane open road, visiting unique places, interacting with people, and having the opportunity for personal growth (Caton and Santos 2007).

Much of the research investigating Route 66 is situated within the larger geographic focus on symbolic landscapes, particularly the cultural impact of commemoration at museums, monuments, memorials, and historic parks. Since the 1960s, heritage displays have increased in American public space as communities reinvent themselves by expressing their collective memory at museums, heritage sites, and historical spectacles, in part to advance their economies through increased tourism (Lowenthal 1998; Hoelscher 2006; Doss 2010). Memorialization in public spaces typically projects authority and permanence to observers and gives the impression that commemorative landscapes are permanent and impartial, even when they are contested spaces where memory and identity are negotiated amongst disparate groups (Dwyer and Alderman 2008; Alderman and Inwood 2013). However, creators often attempt to carefully craft place images and historical narratives that legitimize their historical perspective, recording a selective version of history for consumers (Lowenthal 1976; Lowenthal 1998; DeLyser 1999; Urry 2002; Foote 2003; Alderman and Dwyer 2009; Hurt 2010). As a result, communities and museums often infuse their physical and symbolic landscapes with historic imagery and interpretation meant to please the consumptive nature of tourists, but that lacks the presentation of multiple perspectives of the past (Hughes 1992; Johnson 1999; Schöllmann and others 2000; Inwood 2010).

Many geographers have explored the creation of heritage sites. Some have focused their research in urban settings. For example, towns including New Glarus, Wisconsin, and Lindsborg, Kansas, have emphasized aspects of their heritage to attract tourists to heritage festivals and to visit buildings with ste-

reotypical ethnic architecture that emphasize their Swiss (New Glarus) and Swedish (Lindsborg) ancestry and folk traditions (Hoelscher 1998; Schnell 2002, 2003). Others have assessed the commemorative landscape and the representation of heritage that is projected to observers at monuments and other historic sites. Significant work that unpacks heritage texts in the collective memory includes how Americans commemorate (or choose to forget) sites of violence and tragedy (Foote 2003), memorialization of the civil rights movement in the American South (Dwyer and Alderman 2008), how the controversial past is remembered and forgotten in Berlin, Germany (Till 2005), the commemorative landscape at a Savannah, Georgia, monument remembering slavery (Alderman 2010), thematic representations of American Indians along the Great Plains section of the Lewis and Clark Trail (Blake 2004), and an analysis of the uneven process of accurately commemorating an Oklahoma land run (DeLyser 2008). Key to this research is an analysis of what narratives are remembered, what is ignored or forgotten, which social actors and ideologies shape the commemorative landscape, and where sites of public memory are located.

It is the relationship between tourists, places, and the commemorative landscape that we seek to explore with our research. The cultural landscape offers insights into the collective memory of communities who selectively shape their surroundings with historic imagery and interpretations of their past. We are particularly interested in the cultural heritage narratives that are presented to tourists—and which are deemphasized—at museums and interpretive sites along Route 66.

METHODS

Discourse analysis is a critical method that seeks to understand and describe how certain narratives and meanings are produced and privileged over others. Discourses are commonly expressed through cultural texts, from cinematic film to billboards to museum displays. Because these texts and the discourses attached are used to validate claims about landscape, place, and culture; structure ways of thinking about place; and shape the way people understand and view the world, there is a well-established tradition of discourse analysis in geography (Bartram 2003; Rose 2007). Approached in this way, cultural texts found at Route 66 interpretive sites shape the way visitors view and understand the Mother Road. Because of this, we used discourse analysis to uncover and understand the meanings of textual data presented to visitors at forty-six interpretive sites along Route 66.

In order to determine what interpretive themes are common along Route 66, we visited forty-six interpretive sites between May 2012 and July 2013.² Each location was sponsored by a private nonprofit, local, state, or federal organization and was typically included in tourist guidebooks. Smaller local nonprofit facilities were most numerous, although most state Route 66 associations sponsor museums with significant interpretive space. Prior to the research and sub-

sequent discourse analysis, four a priori codes were established based on expectations from a previous research project: automobility, pioneers, economy, and east to west. We took detailed notes at each site. All displays and interpretive materials with original interpretation were photographed for cataloging and analysis. The information was then put into the qualitative software Nvivo 10 and a discourse analysis was conducted. Each tourist site was first analyzed independently using the a priori codes while also looking for new significant themes. The data for each tourist site was thoroughly examined and coded into important categories or general themes. After each data set was independently analyzed, a review of all themes across all sites was conducted and they were aggregated into categories. Once the categories were identified, both source counts and reference counts were taken to understand the magnitude of the themes. Source counts refer to how many textual signs mention that particular theme; reference counts denote how many times that theme is referenced within each source. Therefore, the reference count may be bigger than the source count if the theme is referenced several times within one source. Once these counts were compiled, themes that appeared at 60 percent or more of the interpretive sites were deemed significant and further explored for meaning and importance. The 60 percent threshold excluded those themes that were place specific or narrowly focused, while offering an illustrative example of common themes along Route 66. Five important narratives emerged.

ROUTE 66 GEOGRAPHIC THEMES

Route 66 historic sites have created “a dynamo of heritage travel” drawing both domestic and foreign tourists to the roadway (Listokin and others 2011, 9). An economic impact study argues that tourists commonly list the themes of “history/nostalgia, pop/culture, roadside attractions, specific destinations, and fun/freedom” when thinking of the roadway (Listokin and others 2011, 20). Another author argued that domestic tourists interpret Route 66 as representing the Old West of cowboys and Indians, flight from adversity, and the power and freedom of private automobiles (Dedek 2007).

In reality, the narratives presented to travelers are more nuanced. Five themes consistently dominate interpretation along the highway. 1) The narrative *Route 66 flows east to west* discusses the dominant thematic westward flow of people and ideas along the road. 2) Not surprisingly for a roadway, *Route 66 is an example of U.S. automobility* and the setting for memorable family vacations as well as journeys of personal discovery and freedom. 3) Much of the personal reminiscing revolves around the post–World War II heyday of Route 66 and perceived golden age of the United States. Thus, *Route 66 highlights nostalgia for the 1950s* in the form of classic American automobiles, small-town cafes, neon lights, and period music. 4) In many places, Route 66 is a microcosm of small town America. Interpretive materials focus on the morphology of small towns as *Route 66 is illustrative of the economic transformation of its*

communities. 5) Finally, the narratives of individuals and perseverance of family businesses along the highway are recorded in oral histories. Frequently, interpretation illustrates that *Route 66 is a repository of community memory* and a unifying force bringing together community members.

ROUTE 66 FLOWS EAST TO WEST

Although Route 66 links Chicago and Los Angeles and can be driven in both directions, information presented to tourists overwhelmingly views Route 66 as a westward-flowing road. Thirty-one of our forty-six interpretive sites (67 percent) reinforced the perception that Illinois is the beginning and California is the end of Route 66. Overall, an east-to-west flow is referenced 133 times in interpretation along the highway, while west-to-east movements are limited to twelve appearances. Specifically, the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway states that Illinois is “Where the Mother Road Begins” at their several dozen wayside exhibits, and similar phrasing is used at several interpretive sites including the Illinois Route 66 Hall of Fame and Museum in Pontiac. In California, “end of the trail” signage at the Santa Monica Pier notes the conclusion of Route 66. California as the end of the highway is repeated elsewhere in the state including at interpretation at the California Route 66 Museum in Victorville.

Rarely is a significant eastward movement of people or economic goods along Route 66 discussed. The western migration of Dust Bowl refugees from the southern Great Plains to California as well as the post–World War II population shift to the West Coast reinforces this east-to-west interpretation of the highway. The westward flow is repeated in multiple places along the roadway. The Powerhouse Visitors Center (Kingman, Arizona) exhibits state that historically “moving westward was desirable” for Americans, Route 66 State Park (Eureka, Missouri) interpretation notes the road’s nickname “the Way West,” and the Chandler Route 66 Interpretive Center in Oklahoma reinforces the concept, noting that California was “the final leg of the journey.” Contemporary tourist behavior also supports the dominant east-to-west orientation of the highway. A recent study of nearly 4,200 respondents reported that more than 61 percent of Route 66 tourists primarily traveled west toward California instead of east toward Illinois (Listokin and others 2011).

On the road, interpretation states that east meets west in the short Kansas section of Route 66 and in neighboring eastern Oklahoma. Several sites make this claim, although the Cyrus Avery Memorial Bridge and Centennial Plaza (Tulsa, Oklahoma) posits that the specific meeting point is where Route 66 crosses the Arkansas River (Figure 2). While in terms of mileage, the midpoint of Route 66 is in the Texas Panhandle, Oklahoma has long been the historic transition for travelers between the more familiar Midwest and the physically and culturally exotic Southwest (Wallis 2001; Krim 2006). As the Route 66 Interpretive Plaza (Tulsa, Oklahoma) states, eastern Oklahoma is “the point on the road where the landscape begins to change and the road seems to stretch

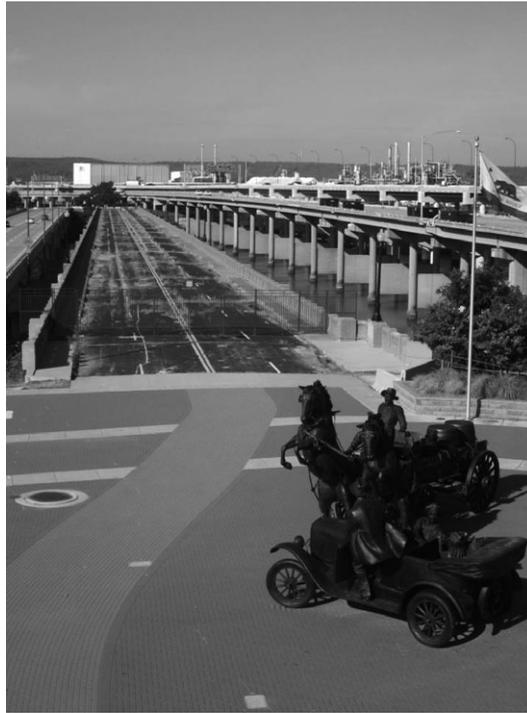


FIG. 2—The Cyrus Avery Memorial Bridge and Centennial Plaza in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is the self-designated meeting point between east and west on Route 66. The bronze statue “East Meets West” sits in front of the historic 11th Street Bridge that carried Route 66 traffic over the Arkansas River until 1980. (Photograph by Douglas A. Hurt, July 2013).

out in anticipation of its long journey to California.” Several other sites, including Route 66 Park in Oklahoma City, attempt to situate Oklahoma as the core or “heartland” of the road. By the time travelers reach the eastern Texas Panhandle, interpretation states they have reached the “gateway” to the Southwest, a designation used in eastern New Mexico as well. A significant gap in sites between Tucumcari, New Mexico, and Winslow, Arizona, limits the creation of a more refined delineation, although it seems safe to assume that the bulk of New Mexico and Arizona are considered southwestern states.

ROUTE 66 IS AN EXAMPLE OF U.S. AUTOMOBILITY

Most historic sites astride Route 66 emphasize the highway and automobiles as enablers of personal freedom through transportation mobility. Mobility is a dominant narrative as thirty-eight of our forty-six study sites (82 percent) emphasize automobility and the theme is referenced a total of 316 times. The liberty of the open road, coming-of-age explorations of personal discovery, memorable family vacations, and cross-country migrations are often featured at interpretive sites. As an interpretive display at Route 66 State Park (Eureka, Missouri) simply states, Route 66 symbolically “has forever meant ‘going some-

where.” Much of the reminiscing takes place in the 1950s, when middle-class families regularly took vacations on Route 66, ex-GIs moved westward as they acquired jobs on the West Coast, and the discontented Beat Generation traveled. These experiences, which are viewed through overwhelmingly positive lenses, position the 1950s version of Route 66 as the golden age of the highway. No doubt, the childhood experiences of the baby-boom generation are disproportionately reflected in Route 66 interpretation today.

The creation of U.S. Highway 66 in the 1920s is coupled with the newfound availability of automobiles to middle-class Americans at the Donley County Texas Route 66 Safety Rest Area. The interpretation states that Route 66 was completed “at a time when our country was first enjoying its romance with the automobile. It was a time, when for the first time, America was on the move.” Whereas travel by train was rigid and controlled by the schedules of railroad companies, automobility gave rise to a personalized type of movement. Although Route 66 was not the first transcontinental road, its birth at the same time when many Americans were falling in love with automobiles, as well as its connection from the Midwest to the exotic Southwest, gave added significance to the roadway.

Contrastingly sharply with the positive views of 1920s mobility are the Dust Bowl journeys of the 1930s. Difficulty of travel is a common theme with poorly maintained dirt roads, flat tires and other mechanical trouble, as well as challenging weather conditions noted in oral histories. The economic struggle of migrant families is a depressing reminder of the automobility provided by Route 66. The fictional journey of the Joad family from Oklahoma to California in the John Steinbeck novel *The Grapes of Wrath* is frequently referenced as symbolic of the 1930s Great Depression (Figure 3). The sub-theme of economic survival and perseverance is strong in Oklahoma, a core Dust Bowl state. At the Oklahoma Route 66 Museum in Clinton, the interpretation states that during the struggles of the Great Depression “the highway became a mirror held up to the nation and some Americans didn’t like what they saw.”

The depressing depiction of the highway and Dust Bowl stand in stark juxtaposition of the more optimistic narratives found in Arizona and California. Despite devoting less space to the Dust Bowl, the more positive narratives include themes such as available employment for displaced migrant farmers and hope for a better future. At the Cadiz Summit Rest Area in California, a positive view characterizes Route 66 as “a highway of hope that led thousands of people to a new life” in California. Steinbeck’s portrayal of Route 66 as the road of flight is also partially refuted at the Route 66 Mother Road Museum (Barstow, California). The desperation of Dust Bowl economic refugees is minimized in favor of the transformational West Coast population boom and economic growth that began due to World War II–related industries and continued into the 1960s. In Barstow, the optimism of the western states is



FIG. 3—The fictional Joad family is referenced as an example of Dust Bowl automobility at the National Route 66 Museum in Elk City, Oklahoma. Museums in Oklahoma, a core Dust Bowl state, emphasize Great Depression mobility and economic struggles. (Photograph by Douglas A. Hurt, October 2012).

repeated with the argument that “Americans relied on Route 66 to change their circumstances for the better.”

Beginning with the 1950s, museums consistently portray travel along Route 66 in an overwhelmingly positive light. Improved road conditions, increased automobile reliability, and higher rates of speed replaced the challenging transportation experiences of the 1930s. Mobility, for many middle class Americans, became a cherished freedom and automobiles became extensions of their personal identity. As an oral history at the Route 66 State Park (Eureka, Missouri) states, roads like Route 66 had “no boundaries. . .the highways are not closed in the dark or at state borders.” Romanticized accounts of family vacations along Route 66 capture the youthful experiences of the baby-boom generation as travel on Route 66, as stated at the Route 66 Mother Road Museum (Barstow, California), “promised an adventure of a lifetime.” Once again, interpretive sites in Arizona and California emphasize the post-World War II population shift from the Rust Belt to Sunbelt that transformed their communities and economies.

Today, Route 66 is known, in part, for the lure of its open road. Driving classic automobiles at a slower pace, stopping at landmarks and local businesses instead of generic chain franchises, and enjoying the journey instead of solely moving from point to point as rapidly as possible characterize the modern Route 66 experience. As the Chandler Route 66 Interpretive Center in Oklahoma states, travelers attempt to capture “the experience of going, rather than of merely being transported from place to place.” For an increasing number of tourists, Route 66 is a destination in itself—the ultimate road trip.

ROUTE 66 HIGHLIGHTS NOSTALGIA FOR THE 1950S

Not surprisingly, positive Route 66 experiences are emphasized more often than negative narratives associated with the highway. Classic 1950s automobiles and motorcycles are often displayed to highlight what is considered to be the golden age of Route 66. Exhibits featuring small town cafes, mom-and-pop businesses, neon lights, and period music frequently reinforce this theme. For many current middle-aged American tourists, an interpretation emphasizing the 1950s is a return to the innocence of their youth. Multiple oral histories and recollections displayed in Route 66 facilities illustrate this theme. Twenty-nine of our forty-six interpretive sites (63 percent) emphasize the 1950s in their discussions of Route 66 history and this nostalgic era is referenced on 166 occasions.

At the Missouri Route 66 Welcome Center Rest Stop, Eastbound I-44 (Conway, Missouri), signage places the “Golden Years” of Route 66 between 1945 and 1955. Increased tourism that guaranteed economic growth, healthy downtowns full of road-oriented businesses, as well as a general aura of affluence characterize the post-World War II period according to interpretation. The Baxter Springs Heritage Center and Museum in Kansas dramatically characterizes the 1950s “glory days” as a time when, “Americans responded to the lure of the open road, and fell in love all over again with automobiles, creating a landscape and an attitude that changed America forever.”

Many Route 66 sites recreate the appearance of the 1950s (Figure 4). The Chandler Route 66 Interpretive Center in Oklahoma uses neon lighting to complement their displays and states that neon serves as “a visual



FIG. 4—Many Route 66 interpretive sites attempt to capture the look and vibe of the 1950s. In Tucumcari, New Mexico, the Blue Swallow Hotel has served Route 66 travelers since 1939. Resorting rooms and vintage neon signs attract travelers seeking a nostalgic return to their youth. (Photograph by Douglas A. Hurt, March 2013).

description of Route 66 communities during the highway's heyday." Reconstructed diners, historic signs from family businesses, and abundant period photos also help situate the 1950s at the center of the Route 66 tourist experience. As the Joliet Area Historical Museum and Route 66 Welcome Center in Illinois notes, recreating visual elements of the 1950s offers tourists a "slice of Americana" that is deemed to be an authentic representation of American culture.

The interpretive return to the 1950s also evokes, as presented at the Oklahoma Route 66 Museum in Clinton, the image of "a simpler America." Interpretation there continues, "to most Americans, the Road is a reflection of days gone by, a simpler time when they cruised toward the setting sun with the entire family, looking for adventure." However, the gaze of 1950s nostalgia minimizes dangers of driving on a narrow, outdated road and ignores the discrimination found along the route. The difficult experiences of minorities and post-Dust Bowl economic refugees is seldom discussed, or even alluded to, in Route 66 memory.

ROUTE 66 IS ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION OF ITS COMMUNITIES

Economic issues are rarely divorced from interpretation, due in part to the economic reliance of many small towns on Route 66 tourism. A total of thirty-eight of the forty-six study sites (82 percent) discussed economic growth or decline in their community or surrounding region. Overall, economic issues were referenced an incredible 444 times with positive views (309 total) outnumbering negative economic themes (135 times). Initially, business owners were drawn to the roadway to serve the increasing traffic on Route 66. Concentrations of businesses along Route 66—the main street of many communities—formed the nucleus of newly revised central business districts. From the 1920s through the 1950s, economic successes dominate interpretation as the road brought commerce and tourists to previously isolated areas. As the Texas Route 66 Museum in McLean explains, "Route 66 brought travelers and automobiles and a kind of prosperity that the land never could have provided." However, economic depression and dereliction is discussed with some frequency as well. Many mom-and-pop businesses did not survive the national economic restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly when their location was bypassed by newer alignments of Route 66 and eventually the nearby interstate. The struggle of small-town, marginalized communities to economically survive is a significant story presented along Route 66.

The interpretation at the Journeys to Winslow (Arizona) exhibit succinctly summarizes the catastrophic economic impact felt by communities bypassed by the interstate highway system. The 1979 completion of Interstate 40 "was the death knell for the city's vibrant downtown" on the historic alignment of Route 66. Personal accounts of business owners confronted with a dramatic drop in

traffic are found at many Route 66 interpretive sites. Businesses either struggled to survive in their existing location, closed, or relocated to places with better accessibility and visibility. At the Route 66 Mother Road Museum (Bristow, California) an oral history reflected on the economic change brought to Dansby, California, after the interstate bypass. One business owner reflected “now the freeway’s open, and it’s made a white elephant out of this set-up. There’s terrific loss here.”

In other instances, increasing levels of tourism after 1990 have encouraged communities to focus on heritage tourism as a method to revive their local economies. Locally owned, sometimes multigenerational businesses and cafés on Route 66 sharply contrast with the economically homogenizing influences impacting America. Although newfound economic growth is limited to select communities that fully accept their Route 66 heritage, the economic continuity and survival of many small towns is often repeated. Winslow, Arizona, with its isolated and stagnant downtown bypassed by Interstate 40, eventually embraced its past. According to the Journeys to Winslow exhibit, promotion of Route 66 cultural-heritage tourism encouraged tourists to “pull off the interstate to slow down and experience the charm and authenticity of an earlier time” (Figure 5). Atlanta, Illinois also tapped the economic potential of Route 66 tourism. According to the Atlanta Museum, a 1940s realignment of Route 66 that bypassed the city center and the 1970s construction of nearby Interstate 55 “eroded the town’s ability to support its local businesses” and led to gradual economic stagnation and increased dereliction. After community leaders began a heritage tourism campaign in the 1990s, many downtown businesses were



FIG. 5—The 1979 Interstate 40 bypass of downtown Winslow, Arizona economically devastated downtown. An economic rebirth followed city leaders emphasizing Route 66 heritage tourism. Route 66 passes by Standin’ on the Corner Park, a reference to the lyrics in the famous Eagles song “Take it Easy.” (Photograph by Douglas A. Hurt, July 2013).

revived and “once again Rt. 66 is helping Atlanta just like it did in the 1920s and 30s.” Although many examples of economic loss are along the roadway, economic continuity and revival is also a powerful Route 66 theme.

ROUTE 66 IS A REPOSITORY OF COMMUNITY MEMORY

Finally, Route 66 is a unifying force helping to unite communities and focus individuals on common historical themes and preservation goals. Although the narratives presented to tourists are selective, they commonly include the perseverance of family businesses along the road, reinforcing the idea that Route 66 is a refuge from modern big-box retailing, strip developments, and interstate super slabs. At many Route 66 interpretative sites, extended oral histories detail the daily life of individuals and communities along the road from the 1930s through the 1990s. Thirty-three of the interpretive sites (71 percent) promote aspects of collective memory of their Route 66 locations and the theme of community is referenced a total of 242 times.

Oral histories at Route 66 sites revolve around a variety of themes, including experiences while growing up along the road, running businesses that served travelers, hosting community festivals and events, as well as experiencing 1930s to 1960s family vacations on the highway. Although there are commonalities to the stories, oral histories featured at Route 66 facilities showcase the uniqueness of towns and help create distinctive community identities. At the Baxter Springs Heritage Center and Museum in Kansas, the local cultural, social, and economic impacts of Route 66 are highlighted. The road served as a cornerstone to creating a community identity since residents “changed our dreams, our goals, and our way of life because of exposure to the rest of the country, and later, the rest of the world,” as Baxter Springs developed into a regional central place after the construction of Route 66.

Renovated historic Route 66 buildings can also act as unifying nodes in communities. At the Illinois Hall of Fame and Museum in Pontiac, the restored Ambler’s-Becker’s Texaco Service Station in Dwight, Illinois, is featured as “a welcome center for the community and a shining example of what preservation efforts can accomplish along Route 66” (Figure 6). The interpretive display at the Missouri Route 66 Welcome Center Rest Stop, Westbound I-44 (Conway, Missouri), further reinforces the unifying impact of tourism upon Route 66 communities, arguing that unique businesses and landmarks on the road are “bound together in history by their connection” to Route 66.

Overwhelmingly, the public memory housed in Route 66 interpretive sites presents a collectively positive view of the American past. According to one oral history displayed at the Powerhouse Visitors Center (Kingman, Arizona) recalling a family vacation, “everything seemed bigger and better, friendlier, and nicer on Route 66 on that 1949 trip.” Over time the road has become a “symbol of what is best in the American character,” according to the Donley County Texas Route 66 Safety Rest Area interpretation and a “testimony to



FIG. 6—In Dwight, Illinois, the restored Ambler's-Becker's Texaco Service Station serves as an example of community cooperation and pride. Route 66 is characterized by unique places and landmarks, a stark contrast to the homogenizing chain businesses clustered along interstates. (Photograph by Douglas A. Hurt, May 2012).

where we have been and what remains of our past,” according to the Oklahoma Route 66 Museum in Clinton. This endless optimism, in many ways, is part of the price of commodifying Route 66 places for the national and global tourist industries.

CONCLUSIONS

In order to explore what heritage themes Route 66 sites convey to tourists, we assessed the information presented to visitors at nearly four-dozen museums and interpretive sites astride the road using the qualitative software Nvivo 10. Five themes dominate interpretation. Route 66 thematically flows east to west with Chicago as the beginning and Los Angeles as the end of the highway. Mobility and personal freedom of movement through automobiles are encapsulated in the history of the road. In addition, Route 66 highlights nostalgia for the 1950s with classic American automobiles, music of the era, and neon lights representing this golden age of the road. Economic decline, and frequently the economic continuity of communities, is often found in interpretive materials. Finally, Route 66 museums are repositories of community memory as oral histories preserve the narratives of individuals and families who owned businesses on the road for multiple decades.

The geographic themes presented to tourists along Route 66 are particularly selective. While this is not surprising since remembering the past is an inherently biased process, interpretation seems particularly sanitized when dealing with racial and ethnic discrimination. Slighted Route 66 themes include a lack of minority voices that faced racism and discrimination along the road. In par-

ticular, the stories of African-Americans, American Indians, Hispanic Americans, and other underrepresented groups are nearly absent from interpretation. While the stories of women travelers, business owners, and preservation advocates are regularly featured and the economic discrimination of low-income migrants during the Dust Bowl is discussed, other minority experiences are referenced only seven times at our study sites. The sole significant interpretation of the negative treatment of minorities is at Route 66 State Park (Eureka, Missouri). There, a small board discusses the historic Alberta's Hotel in Springfield, Missouri, "one of the few overnight accommodations for blacks along Route 66 in Missouri" before the end of racial segregation when "African American travelers had few places to stay." Only recently have Route 66 scholars called for a balanced interpretation of Route 66 narratives (see, for example, Listokin and others 2011; Wallis 2014). Certainly this sanitizing of history is not unique to Route 66 and in some ways it supports the preconceived stereotypes of tourists, including many international visitors, who view Route 66 in utopian terms.

To a great degree, the narratives presented at Route 66 interpretive sites represent the nostalgic views of the baby-boom generation who reminisce about the post-World War II experiences of their youth. Other than regular images of Lightning McQueen, Mater, Sally, and other *Cars* characters, little interpretation is oriented towards younger visitors. While understanding the past is important, what value do frequent accounts of post-World War II family vacations and rows of 1950s automobiles hold to the modern generation of Route 66 travelers? The story of recent (post-1990s) preservation successes, new Route 66 museums and festivals, as well as a heightened public awareness of the challenges facing the road rarely have a central place in Route 66 interpretation. The lack of a consistent interpretive focus upon younger travelers negatively influences visitation. A recent national survey showed that only approximately 12 percent of Route 66 travel parties include children (Listokin and others 2011).

Even though five narratives dominate Route 66 interpretation, regional differences have created multiple themes along the highway. Visitors to Illinois and Missouri interpretive sites are typically informed of the economic challenges facing their small towns, tourists in Oklahoma frequently learn of Dust Bowl struggle and despair, and California travelers are introduced to the positive story of economic and population growth of the West Coast during and after World War II. As well, interpretation along Route 66 is currently geographically imbalanced. Of our forty-six study sites, thirty-five are located in the eastern half of the road in Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma.

The frequent repetition of five narratives at interpretive facilities along Route 66 offers a window into the cultural heritage of the United States for both foreign and domestic tourists. Linear transects present unique opportunities to assess geographic themes and compare regional differences in memorializing the past. Other roadways including the Lincoln Highway and Pacific

Coast Highway are additional targets of this type of geographic study. Although positive themes dominate and regional differences influence interpretation, a remarkable consistency of narratives greets Route 66 visitors. While the legitimacy of these narratives can and should be questioned, they no doubt influence how people remember and value the past along U.S. Highway 66.

NOTES

¹ Widely available Route 66 guidebooks that focus on the entire highway transect include McClanahan (2008) and Knowles (2011). State Route 66 associations typically create guides and/or web resources for travelers as well. The most thorough and updated state-focused Route 66 resource is Ross (2011).

² We traveled to each interpretive site once during the study period. Several research trips were necessary to complete the fieldwork. Illinois and Missouri locations were visited in May 2012, Kansas and eastern Oklahoma in August 2012, central Oklahoma in September 2012, western Oklahoma in October 2012, Texas and New Mexico in March 2013, and Arizona and California in July 2013. Visitor center videos and audio recordings presenting original interpretation were purchased or recorded with permission and transcribed at a later date.

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