

Route 66

Route 66. Just the name evokes images of roadside attractions, family vacations and drive-ins. The Texas Eagle tracks follow old Route 66 off and on all the way from Chicago to St. Louis. When the road was created in 1926 it traversed 2,400 miles across Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. The highway is significant as the first year-round road linking Los Angeles and Chicago and it reduced the driving distance of earlier routes by 200 miles. But the road's meaning to America and the world far surpasses its use as convenient transportation.

For those too young to remember traveling the famous highway, literature, music, drama and art hint at its fame. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck called Route 66 the "Mother Road," and the "Road of Flight" with reference to the thousands of Oklahomans fleeing to California during the depression and dust bowl of the 1930s. After World War II, Route 66 symbolized the new optimism that pervaded the nation's economic recovery. Known as the "Main Street of America," Route 66 beckoned free-spirited, independent Americans to drive west and pursue the American Dream.

From the 1920s through the 1960s, Route 66 was the way to motor west. Vacationers en route to California and people seeking the American dream experienced both the wide cross section of American culture along Route 66. By linking rural and urban communities from Chicago to Los Angeles, the highway permitted an unprecedented flow of ideas and economic growth across the country. With the advent of car culture and tourism after World War II, Route 66 facilitated large-scale settlement of the west.

Route 66 underscored the importance of the automobile as a technological achievement, but more important to the American psyche, it symbolized unprecedented freedom and mobility for every citizen who could afford to own a car. Rising numbers of vehicles increased the need for improved highways and spurred the federal government to invest in roadways to link small town USA with metropolitan capitals.

Newer interstate highways made Route 66 inefficient for long-distance travel, and the road was decommissioned and removed from the U.S. highway system in 1985. Highway markers were removed and pieces of the road were renamed or served as service roads along new highways. The American public was not willing to let this important piece of history disappear. So, Congress passed the Route 66 Preservation Program Act in 1999 to preserve the remaining segments of the road and the familiar "gas, eat, sleep" businesses. Organizations in each state along the route administer the program and assist local communities with grants and technical information.

In many small towns along the Amtrak route, you can glimpse the historic structures and famous road which became a symbol of the American people's heritage of travel and their legacy in seeking a better life.

Source(s):

National Park Service. (n.d.). Trails and Rails. Retrieved February 7, 2011 from <http://www.nps.gov/findapark/trailsandrails.htm>

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