



by Alexandra Edwards

America's Mother Road

In today's ever-changing world, the preservation of American heritage is more important, now more than ever.

Accomplishments, events, fashions and fads over the past several decades are what have made this country so unique. From the great movie stars of the forties and big flashy cars of the fifties, to the space age sixties, the American way of life became an icon to the world.

American made fast cars and hot rods of the fifties and sixties became the envy of every nation, which is probably why one highway in particular became a household name. U.S. Highway Route 66, founded in 1926, was one of the first roads connecting Chicago to Los Angeles. Unlike most U.S. roads that run either



north and south or east and west, Route 66 ran diagonally, winding through the hundreds of rural and urban towns of eight states.

Affectionately known as Main Street America by the business communities that prospered along the way, Route 66 later gained world recognition as "The Mother Road" after John Steinbeck's masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath*. In the novel, which portrays a family escaping the dust-bowls of Oklahoma for the promised land of California along Route 66, Steinbeck wrote, "The long concrete path... the path of people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership, from the desert's slow northward invasion... 66 is the mother

road of flight."

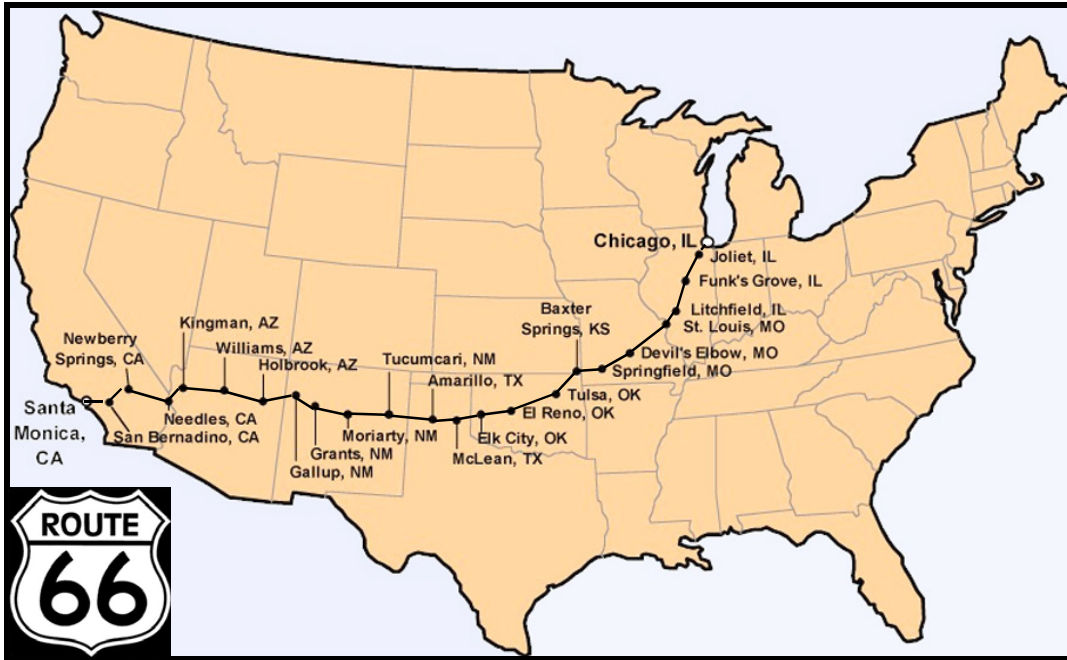
During the 50's and 60's, Nat King Cole, Chuck Berry and The Rolling Stones sang about America's most famous highway, which began, "If you ever plan to motor west... travel my way, take the highway that's the best... get your kicks on Route 66." The mother road even had a TV show named after her. "Route 66" ran from 1960-64 and featured the stories of two young men crossing the U.S in a convertible corvette. During its 83 years, no other highway has received as much attention as Route 66.

Though the network of interstates have made travel across this wonderful land so much faster and easier,

thousands of people each year decide to trek the legendary 2-lane highway of Route 66, so as to capture the true spirit of America, stopping on the way in some of the old motels along the historic road.



Some make the trip in classic vintage cars or on motorcycles, stopping to eat at authentic fifties style diners and soda fountains.



All along the route from Chicago, Illinois through Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, to the state of California, travelers visit the numerous landmarks, stores and museums, picking up all kinds of Americana memorabilia.

Some favorite en-route attractions are the Route 66 Museum in Clinton, Oklahoma, Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo, Texas where 10 of the classic cars are half buried in a wheat field and covered in graffiti. When arriving in California, many travelers have stayed at the famous Wigwam Motel in one of the teepee-shaped rooms established in 1949.

Though still marked by the traditional shield signs, Route 66 is no longer on newer road maps. The highway was officially decommissioned by the Federal

Government in 1985. Anyone wishing to travel the route can do a quick search on the Internet for a detailed map. Although the road starts near Lake Michigan in the windy city, for years there has been controversy between history buffs and travelers as to where the official finishing line was in California. Some argued the end of the trail was on 7th Street in downtown Los Angeles. Others argued it was later extended to the junction of Olympic and Lincoln Blvd. in Santa Monica.

During November of last year, to celebrate its 83rd anniversary, a new sign marking the official "end of the trail" of Route 66 was unveiled at Santa Monica's 100 year old pier where officials decided it would be more beneficial for travelers to park and shop for souvenirs. The occasion did not go without controversy however. Some were critical of the unveiling, claiming that the newly designated sign was re-writing history while cashing in on the tourist trade. Santa Monica tourism officials and the Route 66 Preservation Foundation

were behind the project and strongly denied the accusations. "We're not trying to change the past. We're looking to the future and



giving people a place where at the end of their journey they can come and fly a



kite," said Jim Conkle, chairman of the foundation. Route 66 has told many stories. In 1926 the 'super

highway' was one of the first roads built for the motor car to connect major cities. During the depression, it became the escape route for hundreds leaving the dust-bowl states of Oklahoma and Arkansas for a better life in the promised land of California. By 1938 it was the only major tarmac road connecting the east to the west. During World War Two, the highway provided a crucial supply route to the Pacific and to General Patton's army in the Mojave desert.

By the 1960's, Route 66 had become an all-American household name drawing hundreds of tourists. Travelers now included family vacationers on their way to see the Grand Canyon or maybe taking the kids to see Mickey Mouse at the newly opened Disneyland.

Sixties hippies would travel the entire length of Route 66 in brightly painted psychedelic Volkswagens for no other reason than just to get their kicks. Today, the historic Route 66 signs still line what remains of the old Mother Road, which at last, now includes the official end of the trail sign.

Conkle commented during the unveiling ceremony, "It's an old road that just refused to die. Now after all these years, it finally has a proper finish.

A place to stop, take a photo and make a memory. And when it comes down to it, memories are what this old road has always been about."

Traditions and relics of the past are what make up typical America and what make this country as great and unique as it is. This is why preserving Americana and our past is of vital importance.