

Route 66

1920s-1930s, 1938



Library of Congress

Stretching from Chicago, Illinois, to Los Angeles, California, Route 66, also known as the “Mother Road” and the “Main Street of America,” was one of the country’s major thoroughfares for nearly half a century. Route 66 became one of the most famous roads in America, having been popularized in American culture through books, songs, music, magazines, movies, and television shows.

2009 photo of Hackberry General Store, Route 66, Hackberry, Arizona.

During the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, it was the primary route for the migration of farm workers from the Midwest to California. The migration continued during World War II due to opportunities in California. During this time, it also became one of the key routes for moving military equipment across the country. Due to the efforts of the U.S. Highway 66 Association, Route 66 became the first highway to be completely paved in 1938.

In the 1950s, Route 66 became the main highway for vacationers heading to Los Angeles. The traffic along Route 66 also resulted in the opening of many mom-and-pop establishments, such as restaurants, motels, and gas stations, along the route to service the needs of passing motorists. Route 66 captured the imagination of generations of Americans like no motor highway did before, and the many sights and roadside attractions along the route became an important part of the tourism experience of “getting your kicks on” Route 66.

The construction of the Interstate Highway System resulted in the eventual decline of Route 66, and correspondingly, many of the roadside attractions. Portions of the road have now been designated as National Scenic Byways or as “Historic Route 66” in several states including Arizona, New Mexico, Illinois, and Missouri.



U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration

Contributions & Crossroads

Our National Road System’s Impact on the U.S. Economy and Way of Life

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Library of Congress, photo by Carol Highsmith



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Vintage Shell gas station (left) built in 1926 on Route 66 in Mount Olive, Illinois (photo taken between 1980 and 2006).

A neon sign (above) along 5th Street in Amarillo, Texas, where a piece of historic U.S. Route 66 still runs through town.

Quick Facts

- Route 66 became a popular route because of the active promotion of the U.S. 66 Highway Association, which advertised it as “the shortest, best and most scenic route from Chicago through St. Louis to Los Angeles.”
- Route 66 was featured in John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and the 1940 motion picture, which features the Joad family traveling west on Route 66 from Oklahoma to California and finding the road crowded with other migrants.
- “(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66,” a popular rhythm and blues song, was composed in 1946 by American songwriter Bobby Troup. The lyrics follow the path of Route 66 from Chicago to Los Angeles. Nat King Cole, as the King Cole Trio, first recorded the song in 1946, and it became a hit that appeared on *Billboard* magazine’s R&B and pop charts. The song was subsequently recorded by many other artists.
- Route 66 was further immortalized in the 1960s television series *Route 66*, which featured the adventures of two young men traversing the United States in a Chevrolet Corvette convertible and the events and consequences surrounding their journeys.
- Five new interstates (I-55, I-44, I-40, I-15, and I-10) incrementally replaced U.S. 66 between the 1950s and the 80s. The 1984 bypassing of the last section of U.S. 66 by I-40 led to the official decommissioning of the highway in 1985.
- In 1999, President Bill Clinton signed a National Route 66 Preservation Bill that provided for \$10 million in matching fund grants for preserving and restoring the historic features along the route.
- In 2008, the significance of Route 66 and the importance of preserving it were recognized when the World Monuments Fund listed Route 66 on the Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites.

Reference and Additional Information

<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/back0303.cfm>
<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/byways/byways/2489>
<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/bibus60.cfm>

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