



MAINSTREET OF

BY LARRY S. STEVENS, SR/WA

AMERICA



John Steinbeck characterized it as “the mother road.” It has been immortalized in song and poetry; books have chronicled it; and it even had its own television series to romance it. It is U.S. Route 66. Well, not anymore much to the chagrin of those who begged for the new super highway to be named I-66 to preserve a continuity of history. It was not to be, that designation went to a short stretch of Interstate from Virginia to Washington, D.C. Instead the legendary road was unceremoniously supplanted and dissected into a composite of five different Interstate routes - 10, 15, 40, 44 and 55.



Comfortably seated in our new Honda Accord with the cruise control set, the air conditioner maintaining a perfect 74 degrees, the CD player belting out our favorite artists and the XM radio soothing the miles with 120 different channels to choose from, my wife Patrice and I glided effortlessly over the eastbound side of the twin concrete ribbons that extended to the horizon and beyond. Our only concern is not becoming “roadkill” for the passing 18-wheelers who are oblivious to the signs limiting them to 55 mph.

But it wasn't always so.

With the introduction of the “horseless carriage” in the late 19th century, remote mining and farming communities, like pearls on a string, were gradually and tenuously linked together by bone-jarring, washboard dirt roads that covered the traveler with a thick coating of dust. Or, after a fleeting summer afternoon gully-washer, left him mired in hub-deep goopy red clay. It wasn't so much travel as much as an expedition; detailed planning was required. Water bags were hung over the radiator, running boards were covered with every form of paraphernalia from extra gas to camping gear, and strapped to the back of the car would be extra tires; oh yes, tires of this era lasted a mere three to five thousand miles.

As America ramped up for its role as the economic engine of the Great War in Europe, it was becoming clear that the car was here to stay and a better system of roads was needed. In response to pressure from state highway departments, the federal government passed the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916. The act added funding for the states and encouraged greater cooperation between the state's and local authorities in choosing routes and constructing roads.

At the end of World War I, America's burgeoning economy, flush with victory and rich with cash, was quick to turn its back on the recent strife of war and shift its attention to a new love - the automobile. The Model T, or “tin lizzie” as she was affectionately dubbed, was an affordable means of sating America's call to the open road – despite the fact that in 1920 America had only 36,000 miles of all-weather roads. With affordability, cars ignited the popular imagination for an interstate system of highways that would link the nation together. At the prompting of the American Association of State Highway Officials, federal and state representatives met in Pinehurst, South Carolina in 1926 and laid out a grid of highways that would connect all 48 states - Route 66, connecting Chicago to Santa Monica, was born.

When the Joads' and all the thousands of hollowed-eyed, Dustbowl families, they represented in the heart-rending pages of the *Grapes of Wrath*, came to California in search of hope, Route 66 was by no means a finished product. In fact it was just becoming reality; the last segments not being completed until 1937. Their journey over this parched and desolate land was slow and difficult. Service was little and far between; gas stations were hours of driving apart, there wasn't any towing service, the only auto air-conditioning was an oven blast of air coming through the open windows, and the nights offered but little respite. There weren't any air-conditioned motels, they camped beside the road, and restaurants, even if they could have afforded them, they were limited to a smattering of isolated towns.

When my family traveled east in 1961, I have distinct memories of my dad preparing our 1957 Pontiac for the ordeal. A full tune up was a must. He installed a Mark IV under-dash air conditioner, placed the obligatory water bags on the front of the car, and still he felt compelled



to rise well before dawn “to get a jump on the heat.” He was right of course, even before we had left behind the tepees of the Wigwam Village Motel in Rialto, the temperatures were beginning to climb.

Hours later we finally entered Arizona. The temperatures easily hovered at triple digits and I had my first taste of a new world. There were signs with a black rabbit painted on them - only years later did I find out these were not some mysterious penned up creature, but actually signs for the Jack Rabbit Trading Post. There were also the trinkets and sweet delights of Stucky's. I seem to recall seeing a couple of stuffed Jackalopes, a whimsical creature, half rabbit-half antelope (although I can't remember where, Michael Wallis' *Route 66* says there is one over the counter at the Jack Rabbit Trading Post in Joseph City Arizona), which I continued to ponder for days. And of course there were the ubiquitous curio shops with their authentic Navajo blankets and jewelry normally with either a wooden, or in a few cases, a real Indian sitting in whatever shade could be found out front.

At the age of 12 I had no idea that I was on the edge of an era. Like the Old West, Route 66 was in its twilight, here and there were deep gashes

in the terra-cotta sandstone and there were occasional detours that jarred the car and delayed our progress, but little did I know that the antecedent to this American icon was taking form. President Eisenhower's vision of a nation bound together by high speed interstate highways and financed by Congress in 1954 was rapidly taking shape and altering a cultural icon for ever.

This summer, playing off the lyrics of Bobby Troup's *Route 66* song, we decided to spend a nostalgic day getting our “kicks on Route 66” by tracing that portion of the old highway between San Bernardino and Arizona's eastern border; passing by, and in some cases through, towns that became milestones of progress for the human river headed west to the hoped for promised land of California - Barstow, Needles, Williams, Flagstaff, Winslow and nearly to Gallup.

Much as frontier towns of the Old West became ghost towns when the mines played out or railroads made their existence superfluous, many of the sights in our 1961 trip have been swept away by the cruel winds of progress. Oh the towns are still there, but Main Street is quiet – Wal-Mart having devastated the aging mom and pop store fronts. The

motorist action has shifted to the on-off ramps on the Interstate where the major gas brands compete for your business and the distinctive Kelly-green motif of Holiday Inn and the garish orange and pink of Howard Johnson have been replaced with banal dun colored structures, designed for clean lines, not for originality or character.

As we headed up the Cajon grade, a four lane segment of the 1961 highway serpentine below us and conjured up memories of the Martin Milner and George Maharis characters from the namesake TV show breezing down the road in their signature Corvette.

By mid-morning, we had passed the I-15/40 junction and found ourselves in the dusty little hamlet of Daggett. Its current somnolent tranquility belies its stormy history as the place where miners stumbled out of the Calico Mountains to staunch their thirst in one of the town's three saloons and engage in more deadly pursuits, thus accounting for the large number of dilapidated tombstones on Boot Hill. But for the "Okies," Daggett was a right of passage - the Agricultural Inspection Station was here. It was here that many of these migrants, including the fictional Joad family, were eyed suspiciously and often roused for no particular reason other than they were outsiders, poor and "there was nothing to gain from them."

At midday we had reached Seligman, Arizona, home to The Snow Cap, a greasy spoon takeout joint specializing in "dead chicken and all the trimmings." Despite its "dead chicken" moniker, it was the Road Kill Café that caught our lunch dollars - it had a rustic ambience and more importantly air conditioning.

The Coconino Plateau offered cloud cover, a respite from the heat of the desert and a variation of terrain with stands of dense pine forests and peaks that capture and hold snow during the winter months. Having spent a wintry day in Flagstaff, the unofficial capital of northern Arizona several years ago, we stayed on the Interstate making a mental note that a Wal-Mart and several housing developments had sprung up since we last were here.

In Holbrook we pulled off the highway in search of gas. Holbrook is home to Wigwam Village Motel #6 and mirrors its sister in Rialto, Wigwam Village Motel #7, with 15 concrete wigwams aligned in a semi-circle. The sign out front said, "SLEEP IN A WIGWAM" - concrete, air conditioned and with a full bath, hardly roughing it. From the day the Village opened (June 1, 1950), it was a hit, if for no other reason than to pull out the camera and take a snapshot of the family in front of one of the big concrete tents. However, the petrified

wood scattered about as natural decoration was a harbinger of revelations to come.

Our journey was now pushing hard into mid-afternoon and the thunderheads to the east were becoming ominously black, streaked with rain and occasionally punctuated by pitchforks of lightning. But our plan called for a visit to the Petrified Forest National Park, and after a short visit to the visitor's center, where we were admonished about removing souvenirs of the petrified rock; we took off on a loop through the park. It seems that tons of the park have simply walked away; after all the theory went, there is lots of wood out there and more being uncovered with each passing storm. At one point a rail spur was constructed to bring tourists and facilitate in their removal of this priceless resource. All resources are finite and man's ability to scavenge far exceeded nature's ability to uncover, so what was once a valley littered with a forest of fallen trees has been depleted to a random scattering of samples. The amazing part is, in spite of environmental awareness and conservation efforts; it is estimated that souvenir hunters continue to carry away 25,000 pounds of this 225 million-year-old wood each year. As we closed the park with our return to the park entrance, we passed a derelict structure that was



we decided to spend a nostalgic day getting our "kicks on Route 66" by tracing that portion of the old highway between San Bernardino and Arizona's eastern border

We do Right-of-Way, the Right Way!

Right-of-Way Acquisition/Relocation Services

- Comprehensive right-of-way/relocation services
- Proven project experience with state & federal agencies
- Seasoned professionals

Outdoor Advertising Privatization Services

- Assist in FHWA compliance
- Dedicated experienced staff
- Leaders in State-Wide Service
- State-of-the-Art Technology

Ed Kelly / Rich Doyle
800.861.8314
www.tbegroup.com

TBE GROUP

Serving public and private sector clients nationwide



once the park's lodge. For reasons unsaid, this rock fortress on a high bluff overlooking the badlands at the north end of the park has been abandoned to the elements. Perhaps isolated, stark beauty is just another prosaic casualty to the frenetic pace of the modern travel. It just doesn't compete with a pool for the kids and the in-room Internet service.

At the end of the day, it may be the deteriorating rabbit sculpture at the edge of Jackrabbit, Arizona that represents the quintessential summation of the journey. This rabbit, chipped ears, flaking paint and suffering from general neglect, is symbolic of the Mother Road - abandoned, ignored and physically withering.

While many of the motor courts, curio shops, gas stations and tourist attractions remain; with each passing season, there is attrition. Not of

the historically significant structures of course, but a more insidious and visceral kind of loss. Urban sprawl continues to take its toll; large box stores such as Wal-Mart empty the storefronts through once thriving communities. Local cafes, where the cook's fresh baked pies are offered for lunch, are being shuttered - as irony would have it, by at least one of Route 66's most enduring benefactors, McDonalds. Two New Englanders, Maurice and Richard McDonald, playing off the idea that tourists wanted fast service, cheap food and consistent quality, built the first McDonalds in right on the main drag in San Bernardino in 1939.

So what began as a nostalgic trip designed to enlighten and stroll through the bits and pieces of childhood memories, left us with more than just a bit of melancholy. Steinbeck's Mother Road, once a unique element of Americana, the Main Street of America, has devolved and succumbed to the pressures of modern society - a world where here is like everywhere else, plain vanilla - consistency and familiarity are valued more than eclectic, brash and theatrical.

With this gentrification, sadly we are left with little more than a few historically preserved structures, written accounts, faded pictures, poetry, song, lore and our childhood reminisces. Hardly a suitable legacy for a highway whose history is as colored and garish as the vibrant clays and sandstone that make up the fabric of this land. ❖

REFERENCES

- ¹Get Your Kicks on Route 66, Bobby Troup, 1946.
- ²The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck, 32nd printing, 1971, page 318.
- ³Route 66, The Mother Road, Michael Wallis, page 199.

