

Sept. 3, 2000---

HYDRO, Okla. A wandering traveler could be blessed by all the stars in the sky and not find a woman as sweet as Lucille Hamons.

The native of downstate Abingdon, Ill., ran Lucille's Service Station for nearly 60 years on old Route 66 outside of Oklahoma City.

Lucille died on Aug. 18.

The "Mother of the Mother Road" was 85.

Lucille was the spunkiest character I ever met on Route 66. She was barely 5 feet tall, yet she operated a gas station-general store-diner-bar from 1941 until her death from a stroke. It didn't matter that Interstate 40 was zooming by within spitting distance. Lucille hung tough.

"She died in her mobile home behind the gas station," daughter Cheryl Hamons-Nowka said in a conversation from Lucille's. "Right until she died, every time a tourist drove up, she was out there."

I met Lucille in 1991 during my first journey down the Mother Road. Around 10 a.m. on a weekday I rolled into Lucille's, one mile southwest of Hydro (pop. 977). This is a good stretch of 66. The curbs are faded pink, and the road is shaded by old trees. The sun sparkled through the windshield of my car. I was consumed by the clarity of a new morning.

And Lucille insisted I sit down and have a beer.

"It's the coldest beer in the state!" Lucille crowed as she fetched a tall-boy from an early 1960s Nehi icebox. Then, at 77, Lucille was still wiping windshields and pumping gas at her two-pump station, selling sandwiches and homemade burritos.

Lucille will be missed for her Dust Bowl charms and her direct recall of history. In 1991 I traveled Route 66 as a tourist. I returned to Lucille's in 1996 with a notepad and tape recorder.

The gas station was built by Oklahoma bank robber Carl Ditmore in 1927, less than a year after Route 66 was commissioned on Nov. 11, 1926. Lucille and her husband, Carl, took over the gas station in 1941. For a spell they thought some money was hidden in the station. But all they dug up were bottles filled with Ditmore's bootleg liquor.

Lucille's is one of two remaining upper story (with residence) thrust-out styles of

roadside architecture in Oklahoma. Lucille and Carl installed black and white siding over the original stucco.

Five tourist cabins once flourished just behind and to the east of the gas station. When Lucille and Carl divorced in 1964, he merely moved down to the end of the cabins. Lucille shut them down in the early 1980s. "It got to be too much," she said over another cold beer in 1996. "I don't hire any help."

Hamons-Nowka was born in 1948 above the gas station. Lucille said, "I had all my children at home. Back then, you didn't go to hospitals and pay \$6,000 to have a baby. Two of mine (Delpha Dene and Carl Jr.) cost \$25 and one cost \$30." Lucille added, "I thought \$30 was too high!"

Lucille literally watched the world pass by. "Route 66 has changed," she said. "But I'm enjoying every bit of it. When I came out here, times was rough. Everybody was broke. Including me."

"In 1941, we were just getting over the Depression. I had to give people gas to get on the down the road. I took people in the cabins. I had to feed them. I bought old cars (from broken-down travelers) that wouldn't go any farther. They'd walk the rest of the way. People were going to the West Coast for jobs. I finally decided I wanted one of those old cars."

Lucille's daughter Delpha Dene Martin learned to drive on a disabled 1941 Cadillac that Lucille salvaged. "It didn't have reverse on it," Lucille said. "That means she couldn't park or back up, but she had a lot of fun with it."

In the early years, most of Lucille's visitors were from Arkansas and Oklahoma. "I could tell an Okie from an Arkie in a heartbeat," she said. "Okies had two mattresses on top (of the car). They didn't have mo-tells then, either. When nighttime came, they piled those mattresses underneath trees to sleep. People from eastern Oklahoma would come out here to pick cotton. I'd keep canned goods for those cotton pickers. I would bake hams. The cotton pickers pitched tents and lived in camps. It was just like Grapes of Wrath. But the pickers lost their jobs when machinery came in."

Lucille's father was a cotton farmer, and her family moved from Illinois to Oklahoma when she was an infant. A couple of years ago Hamons-Nowka helped her mom write the book *Lucille: Mother of the Mother Road* (\$28, including shipping; to order, write to Hamons-Nowka at 641 Westwind Rd., Las Vegas, Nev. 89118).

Lucille came close to closing the gas station in 1965. "But I didn't want to miss all this stuff!" Lucille said. "I had to start selling beer in 1966 to make it. I didn't want to do that. But when the highway cut me off, I was lost. I had a daughter (Cheryl) starting college, how was I going to get by?"

Lucille got her kicks by renewing acquaintances with old customers. "A fella just came by and said, 'I wondered if you were still a place,' " Lucille said. "He meant he didn't know I was still running it. He said, 'In 1944 me and a buddy came out here and ordered ham, eggs and coffee.' At that time I had a hot plate in the back where I fixed breakfast. He told me they paid 15 cents apiece for breakfast. There's so many memories people come back and tell me about. This is history. When my generation passes, that's it. . ."

And Lucille's voice trailed off into the plains.

Lucille suffered her first stroke in January 1999. She lost muscle control on the left side of her mouth. Hamons-Nowka said, "A personal hygiene lady came to the gas station every morning to make sure Mom got her makeup on good and had on clean clothes. Once a day a health nurse checked on her. They're the ones who found her dead."

Lucille's gas station will remain open. The family will put the business in a trust. A Lucille Hamons Memorial Foundation will help cover insurance, not only for the gas station, but for other Route 66 landmarks that are more than 50 years old.

"At age 85, it was costing my mother \$208 a month to insure this old building," Hamons-Nowka said. "I do not want other old people out there on the road trying to hang onto these businesses and trying to pay that."

Services for Lucille were held on Aug. 22 at the Lockstone Funeral Home in Weatherford, about seven miles west of Hydro. A funeral procession of nearly 100 cars traveled from Weatherford back to the station where Lucille made one last visit. She was buried in Hydro Masonic Cemetery.

"I'm going to live to be 100," Lucille promised in 1996. She did better than that. Lucille will live forever in the hearts of those of us who met her.