



August 28, 2005----

LEBANON, Mo. -- Like a mystical snake, Route 66 winds past the Munger Moss Motel in pursuit of distant charms. You can sit by the motel pool on a late summer night and hear the roar of the interstate, just south of the motel. Near the pool is a small fireplace where gypsies gather in the shadow of a cherry-red neon sign with a golden arrow and talk in thoughtful, measured tones.

With a seductive rhythm, the arrow points at the motel and promises, "*Sweet dreams -- sweet dreams -- sweet dreams here ...*"

I have wondered "Who Travels America?" Whoever they are, this is where they stop to catch their breath.

The red-brick motel was built in 1946, but it still feels like 1966. The 50-year-old motel sign promises "Free TV." There are no Internet connections, and you park your car directly in front of the motel door. This is my kind of place. I can toss my dirty laundry right into the trunk of my car.

Bob and Ramona Lehman have owned and operated the one-level, 61-room motel since 1971. They were both reared on farms near Alpha, a small town in the northeast corner of Iowa. They had dreams. One dream was to run a motel. So in 1971 they took on the Munger Moss, even though it sounds like something you might have taken to enhance a Grateful Dead concert.

"There were years we struggled and struggled and couldn't get ahead," Ramona said during a quiet summer afternoon at the motel's front desk. "People would think you're no good because you're old. I had lots of people tell me, 'You're an old place...' It almost hurts your feelings.

"Then, about the time Route 66 started coming back circa 1986, a young man from California said, 'I shot a whole roll of film!' I said, 'Of what?' He said, 'The bathroom.' I thought he was kidding. But the light bulb went off. We were starting to tear out the old tile, but then I decided we had to keep what we can."

That's who travels America -- people who are trying to keep what they can.

It can be a song. A relationship. A memory. I stayed in Room 24, the motel's famous "Route 66" room (\$42.95 for two people), full of memories. The room's walls are adorned with nearly 90 photographs of Route 66. The king-sized eggshell foam bed is as fluffy soft as any five-star hotel in Manhattan. Here is a greeting from the room's open guest book:

"April 15, 2003: "Day 5 of my self-imposed trip from L.A. to Chi Town and back. I'm calling this 'The Wrath of Grapes' tour because my mother lived the 'California or Bust' experience as a little girl and now, 70 years later, I'm going the opposite direction. I also consumed a disapporionet sic amount of vino during the 1960s, which may explain the absence of

brain cells required to do this trip on a motorcycle. However, I carefully researched this trip for two years and decided I would only stay in original tourist courts and only eat in authentic greasy spoon cafes. This lends a certain expectation of nostalgia that is rarely achieved -- until I spent the night in Room 24. Thanks, Al Messimer, Westminster, Ga.

"P.S. Next year I'm bringing the whole family."

Ramona spoke with the giving Midwestern details of someone who is never in a hurry. "The motel hasn't changed a lot since we bought it," she said. "There were different color doors. When we came here everything was bright pink and turquoise. There were wooden screen doors, and they all had flamingos. I wish I had the flamingos back. There was an old-time switchboard in here. All the rooms had red Ericofones with the rotary dial on the bottom. They drove me bananas. Everybody picked them up, looked at them and then they would ring."

The switchboard and one red phone are on display in the one-year-old Route 66 Museum in the former Kmart that is now the Lebanon-Laclede County Library, 915 S. Jefferson. The museum was paid for by private donations. "I'd always dreamed of having a museum in town," Ramona said. "And my dream came true there, too."

The Munger Moss had the first concrete pond in Lebanon (pop. 13,000). In the late 1950s, the previous owners dynamited the 9-foot deep pool foundation, covering the ground with mattresses so flying rocks would not break motel windows.

"I could kick myself," she said. "I had a Munger Moss neon sign on the interstate with a woman diving into the pool. In the late '70s we lost rights to that property. And I never got a picture of it."

Munger Moss business has never really hit stride since 9/11. "We still get people from other countries here and there, but it's not like before 9/11," Ramona said. Trond Moberg from Norway still brings members of the Norwegian Route 66 Association. Ramona added, "I do see more Americans traveling, and that's good. Like the people from Lebanon, Ohio you sent here I had met them at the Pig Hip on Route 66 in Broadwell, Ill.. They were new and they were excited."

Ramona admitted to one pet peeve.

Once in a while she chastizes a tourist stopping to take a picture of the gorgeous neon sign -- without spending a night at the motel. "I used to go out and talk to them," she said. "I remember asking, 'Do you need a room?' And they'd say, 'No, we have to go on down the road, but we're thankful that you're here.' I finally had enough one day, and I said, 'If everybody was like you, do you think I'd be open? If you appreciate what you find here, you better spend some money here.' But they're always in a hurry and they're trying to get all this stuff covered in a short period of time.

"Then they wonder why they didn't enjoy the trip."

This summer, Ramona has been running the show while Bob recuperates from knee replacement surgery. Next year marks the 60th anniversary of the Munger Moss Motel. "I'd say it would be our last year," said Ramona, 67. "We have a house we bought about seven miles out of town. If we sold this, I'd try to find somebody who loves Route 66. Maybe there's

potential here that hasn't be realized. I don't have to be super busy. It's too damn hard on me. But I appreciate everyone who comes see me."

In recent years the Lehman's accountant has suggested an increase in room rates. But the motel is paid off. "I don't have mortgage payments anymore," Ramona said. "I haven't raised the rates in four years. The same room that was \$7.50 for two people in 1971 now runs \$33.95." Too bad oil prices didn't follow this modest curve.

Jeff Meyer is one of the road's good guys. In 2003, he received the John Steinbeck Award, presented by the National Historic Route 66 Federation for preservation efforts on Route 66. The Rolling Meadows resident discovered the Munger Moss in 1985, and he estimates he has stayed at the Munger Moss "30 or 40 times" in 20 years.

"Ramona is what makes the motel unique," Meyer said last week. "She takes the time to talk to people. And the place has been open over 50 years -- and it's only had two owners. That's amazing in itself."

The motel's Room 14 is named in Meyer's honor. The bathroom has five different colors of tile. "After he stayed here, he went on further out west," Ramona recalled. "When he came back, he brought me back a dream catcher. So I hung that in his room. I said, 'What if somebody steals it?' He said, 'That's OK, I'll get another one.' And no one has taken it."

Sweet dreams are never stolen.