



TRAVEL THE HIGHWAY TO ADVENTURE WITH TOD AND BUZ



MATTI WILNER
AND
SCOTT BURGESS
AS STARS OF
CBS TELEVISION



FOR 2 to 4 PLAYERS

I traveled the entire Route 66 on a whim in the summer of 1991. The slow pace of the backroads restored my interviewing skills and my ability to listen to the stories of strangers. Former Sun-Times Travel editor Jack Schnedler encouraged me to write about my journey, although I had taken few notes.

This is my report on March 8, 1992

Dust off the rear-view mirror. Wash the windows. Check the oil and get hip to this timely tip: 1992 marks the 66th anniversary of Route 66. The winding 2,448-mile asphalt road from Chicago to Los Angeles was commissioned on Nov. 11, 1926.

Route 66 remains a living legend, even though federal highway authorities officially wiped the last of it from the map in the mid-'80s. The current passion for preserving the remains of the fabled thoroughfare is only the latest of several rebirths.

John Steinbeck called it "The Mother Road" in chronicling the dauntless spirit of the Joad family in his 1936 novel, *Grapes of Wrath*. Many scenes of U.S. 66 are featured in the 1940 film version.

Songwriter Bobby Troup gave the dreams a 1950s' backbeat by penning "Route 66," a classic covered the best by Nat King Cole, and recently interpreted the worst by Depeche Mode.

In the 1960s, the television series "Route 66" created the Hollywood answer to Jack Kerouac's Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise by casting George Maharis and Martin Milner as a couple of clean-cut ramblin' men called "Buz" and "Tod."

By 1976, alas, the speedy but sterile interstate highways had overshadowed the small-town luster of Route 66. In 1984, it officially ceased to be part of the nation's highway system. Signs were removed, and Route 66 became a mirage. Last July, I made a pilgrimage down as much of the original Route 66 as possible. I didn't hit the road intending to write about it. U.S. 66 and its people are ably documented in two fine volumes from St. Martin's Press: the coffee-table book *Route 66: The Mother Road*, by Michael Wallis, and *The Route 66 Traveler's Guide and Roadside Companion*, by Tom Snyder, founder of the Route 66 Association.

My journey was supposed to be inwardly personal and outwardly impersonal. I was just a guy in need of a shave driving around in a dusty mini-van with a bass-heavy tape deck and a bunch of Merle Haggard tapes. I had no desire to cart around a microcassette player, a tripod or a portable computer. That would have given too much structure to a trip that was all about personal freedom.

I wanted to meet people on a one-to-one slow dance across the country. I'll take your picture, can you please take mine?

That was the best way I could learn a bit more about myself - through cheap

hotels, greasy food and tacky roadside attractions. Route 66 was the ultimate Recession Vacation - mano a mano with all that is America.

As Snyder suggests in his book, getting out of your car in northwest Texas and walking in the July heat and wind can be a deeply emotional experience, a scorching appreciation of the common man. If you want a better understanding of America today, get your kicks on yesterday's Route 66.

DAY 1: Chicago to St. Louis. A popular knock on Illinois is to ponder what state we would be in without Chicago. Maybe Nebraska. But one thing is certain - the most diverse stretch of Route 66 runs through Illinois.

Chicago has been the great American transportation center of the 20th century. It was a natural concept, then, to link the migratory road to the rainbow dreams of Los Angeles.

I traced old Route 66 out of its eastern terminus in Grant Park down Adams Street to Ogden Avenue and southwest through Cicero and Berwyn, then south on Harlem Avenue in Lyons and southwest to Joliet Road.

As far south as Wilmington, I began to recognize old Route 66 through two-lane alignments denoted by tattered telephone poles. These roads 'n' poles proved to be points of reference for Route 66 throughout my journey.

I traveled 90 percent of the original Route 66 in Illinois, spending only 20 miles on interstate detours. A neat mid-state respite was the Dixie Truckers Home in McLean, which features a Route 66 Hall of Fame. The original Dixie was built just two years after Route 66's commissioning.

DAY 2: St. Louis to Springfield, Mo.

The onetime charms of Route 66 quickly unfolded outside St. Louis. I loaded up with a concrete (a thick, upside-down milkshake) at Ted Drewes frozen-custard stand and chased it with a 50th-anniversary White Castle commemorative cup. I looked like Jughead stalking Veronica.

The passing of time was apparent on Watson Road (former U.S. 66) out of St. Louis, with the 66 Park-In Theater standing defiantly across the street from a sleek shopping mall that featured an AMC five-screen complex.

The obligatory stop on this stretch was Meramec Caverns in Stanton, Mo., shamelessly promoted through tacky roadside verse, a trademark of old Route 66. This was one of the choicest cheesy souvenir stops on the trip: Commemorative religious plates. Snow globes. Plastic back scratchers. Too much was not enough.

Further down the road, I found a clean room for \$15 a night at the Wagon Wheel Inn in Cuba, Mo. For me, it seemed a little early to crash. For the folks at the inn, it was a different story. It was 4:30 p.m., and an old rail of a man was asleep sitting up on a sagging sofa. He held an open can of beer like the softest note of a lullaby. That was the easy life on old Route 66.

After Cuba, a break in the old road forced me to cross over to I-44. I

rejoined Route 66 at Malone's Service Station in Doolittle, Mo. A sign declared,

"We have unleaded gas!" The attendant brought out an old steel guitar and sang me country songs he wrote while stationed in Germany during World War II. It was the first of countless tender moments on the Mother Road.

DAY 3: Springfield to Tulsa, Okla.

The big deal in downtown Springfield is a commemorative spot where Wild Bill Hickok paid off a gambling debt by fatally shooting the fellow to whom he owed money. Welcome to the Wild West.

Just a dozen miles of the old road slice through a corner of Kansas, but one image of that state will never leave my mind. Just outside Baxter Springs ("The First Cowtown in Kansas"), I came across a rusted 1938 Chevrolet pickup truck for sale for \$1,000. The truck looked to be right out of "The Grapes of Wrath." I did not buy it. . . .

DAY 4: Tulsa to Oklahoma City.

. . . Maybe I should have.

Giving my trip the complete experience, my rented 1991 LeMans broke down at the Route 66 Diner in downtown Tulsa. The car refused to go into reverse. Diner owner Debbie Higgs and customer David Tinnin pushed me out. Higgs eased my frustration with a grilled cheese sandwich on homemade bread, which is made daily by his mother. It was the best lunch of the trip.

Higgs owns a second Route 66 Diner, about four miles east of downtown. That's where comedian Bill Murray dropped \$90 on souvenirs during the summer of 1990 when he did the Route 66 trip with his wife, kids and dog.

I made it to the Tulsa airport, where I exchanged the car for the only mode of transportation the rental desk had left - an eight-passenger mini-van. I felt like a Little League coach in search of his team.

Oklahoma has done a fine job of preserving Route 66. A great portion of the highway is original, replete with challenging banks, bends and rustic bridges. Throughout the state, Route 66 markers let you know you are on the right track. Some residents have gone so far as to dabble in folk art and make their own roadside guideposts.

As night fell, I rolled into Oklahoma City and found a room at Elmo and Barbara Thornbrue's Travel Master Inn, a half-mile off the old road. The rate was \$21.

A teenaged desk clerk took out a slip of paper and filled out my name, street, city and state, the make of my mini-van, my license plate, arrival date, accommodation (1 queen), arrival hour (9:49 p.m.), my Illinois driver's license number, its expiration date, my date of birth and my wake-up call. I gave her the \$2 key deposit. She looked at me, scratched her head and said: "I swear I forgot something."

DAY 5: Laundry day and the Oklahoma City '89ers.

A solar eclipse was in the air, so I took the day off.

Saw the Nashville Sounds beat the Oklahoma City '89ers 5-3 in a minor-league baseball game in 90-degree night heat.

Ex-Cub Calvin Schiraldi arrived in OK-City after being sent down by the Texas Rangers, the '89ers parent club. Just another roadside attraction.

DAY 6: Oklahoma City to Tucumcari, N.M.

This was the longest stretch of driving, covering about 360 miles in nine hours, including stops for food, gas, photo opportunities and local newspapers.

The segment out of Oklahoma City began with a salute to the entertainment industry as I buzzed through Yukon, the home of country star Garth Brooks, and then to the Big 8 Motel in El Reno, where portions of "Rain Man" were filmed. (In the film, the hotel is supposed to be in Texas, and the movie-set sign still reads, "Amarillo's Finest.") The dust-bowled clerk was more than happy to show me Room 117, featured in the film.

There was nothing else going on.

One of Route 66's legendary characters is Lucille Hamons, who runs Lucille's general store down the road in tiny Hydro, Okla. Lucille's, in continuous operation since 1941, is a combination Route 66 museum, gas station (she offered to pump the gas), grocery store, restaurant and tavern. Hamons claims to serve the coldest tall-boys in Oklahoma and insisted I have one - even though it was 11 in the morning.

Readily visible from Route 66 was the four-lane interstate, a fast blur of white. But on the old road I was traveling, the curbed 9-foot-wide lanes were quaint pink. This was one section where driving the Mother Road was like being in on a special secret.

The change in the terrain was plain as I left the green plateaus of Oklahoma for the Texas Panhandle. Just over the border at the intersection of 66 and U.S. 83 in Shamrock, Texas, stands the Tower (gas) Station and adjacent U Drop Inn Cafe. The Tower complex, a fixture since this stretch of Route 66 opened in 1936, is regarded as one of the best examples of Art Deco architecture in the United States. Be warned; the cafe closes at 2 p.m.

Old Route 66 got lost after Shamrock and forced me into some of the longest pieces of interstate driving. I took the old city route through Amarillo, and from that vantage point, it looked like a dried-up oil town. There is a movement to bring Route 66 back past antique shops and restaurants on a re-gratified main drag out of town.

One highlight was the tail-finned Cadillac Ranch (popularized in a Bruce Springsteen song), which was south of Route 66 outside town. Amarillo pop-businessman Stanley Marsh 3 created the "Stonehenge of America" by planting 10 Cadillacs nose down in a field at the same angles as Egypt's

Great Pyramid. The night I visited, Marsh's vision of the American dream seemed to have a lonely and sterile feel. Or was it me?

The best place to absorb the Texas-New Mexico border crossing is Glenrio, N. M., where the Last Motel in Texas/First Motel in Texas sits on the east side of the New Mexico border with a quarter of its sign blown away. I finally wound down in Tucumcari, the town of 2,000 hotel rooms. I found a great one in the Safari Inn, complete with black-velvet lion paintings in my room.

DAY 7: Tucumcari to Gallup, N. M.

Before leaving the Safari, I met a young couple honeymooning their way along Route 66 from Los Angeles through Chicago to their home in Michigan. There is no love like road love.

As I approached Albuquerque, I had a choice: head straight into town (but the Dodgers' AAA baseball team was on the road), or divert north to Santo Domingo, an Indian reservation on the way to Santa Fe. I chose the Indians.

I stopped at the reservation's Santo Domingo Pueblo Mission Church, built 15 years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. Constructed in fine adobe blocks, the outside of the church is frescoed with symbolic Indian ponies. Barefoot boys and girls were playing in the gravel parking lot. The inside of the church was empty. A tall candle burned at the altar.

I wound down in Gallup, which once had the nickname "Drunk City" because intoxicated Native Americans would wander about the streets. Mother Teresa once put it on her list of the world's forsaken places. Now it was dry on a Sunday night.

DAY 8: Gallup, N. M., to Flagstaff, Ariz.

This was a good three-hour drive to catch up on my road tapes. Route 66 rolled through high-desert plains, most notably the Petrified Forest and Painted Desert, where I spent a good portion of my afternoon.

The next stop was Winslow, Ariz. where I tried to re-create the Eagles' classic "Take It Easy" - "Standin' on a corner in Winslow AZ, such a fine site to see; a girl (my lord) in a flatbed Ford, slowin' down to take a look at me."

Nothing happened.

DAY 9: Flagstaff to Barstow, Calif.

If I had only enough time and money to cover just one portion of Route 66, this stretch would be it. The majestic Upland Mountains of northern Arizona met me as I rolled out of Flagstaff (with the Grand Canyon merely 98 miles away) and entered tiny Seligman, Ariz.

Although its population is only 850, Seligman was one of the first towns to recognize the historic value of Route 66. The 160-mile connection between Seligman and Topock, Ariz., is the longest remaining stretch of the old road.

Angel Delgadillo has run a Mayberry-influenced barber shop (\$5 for a haircut) for 38 years on old Route 66 in downtown Seligman. Angel's older brother, Juan, owns the wacky Snow Cap cafe down the street. Juan said he collects weird socks in his spare time. The gentle ebullience of the Delgadillo brothers was a perfect precursor to my drive out of Kingman, Ariz., through the Black Mountains and the Mojave Desert to Barstow.

One thing to understand is that I live in Illinois. I am a flatlander. Another thing is that I was driving a suburban mini-van. What I didn't understand was that it would have been easier to have bypassed this section on I-40.

The slow 3,500-foot corkscrew climb up the Black Mountains to Oatman, Ariz., was full of challenging cuts and sharp switchbacks. But once I got to Oatman, I was justly rewarded.

Oatman is billed as an "authentic Western ghost town." Wild burros, descendants of animals that belonged to gold prospectors, roamed the streets. They ate popcorn out of my hand. The saloon in the Oatman Hotel was full of wild locals, descendants of the gold prospectors, who drank shots of tequila out of my hand.

One local told me his mother had come to California in 1937 on Route 66 through the mountains. She traveled the same road in 1990 and said it had not changed.

I will return to Oatman someday. Maybe for the International Burro Biscuit Throwing Contest held every Labor Day weekend.

DAY 10: Barstow to Santa Monica.

After the stunning contrast of desert-to-mountain driving, the rest of the trip was anticlimactic. The closer I got to Los Angeles, the more I felt I was being pulled back in by reality. More and more cars and trucks appeared on the road. Fast-food outlets popped up, first as innocent specks but later as a disturbing rash.

The saving grace of the homestretch was the Roy Rogers and Dale Evans Museum in Victorville, Calif. Not only did I see the stuffed Trigger, but also a stuffed Trigger Jr. and Dale's stuffed horse, Buttermilk. Another exhibit displayed all of Roy's broken watches.

Roy never discarded anything. This was the most complete tribute to a person's life I have seen.

Route 66 comes to an end at the Santa Monica Pier, south of Los Angeles.

A plaque commemorates its conclusion as the Will Rogers Highway - so named in 1937. The plaque was used to promote the 1952 film, "The Story of Will Rogers."

I had planned to do something remarkable to acknowledge the fact I'd made my trip without getting arrested or going broke - and had gone through only two

vehicles. Maybe jump in the Pacific Ocean. Or drink lots of beer at Barney's Beanery, which is actually on the old road.

But my enduring celebration is a greater grasp of the diverse fibers that shape this country. From Okies and hipsters to bikers and slicksters, the countless Route 66 travelers over 66 years have been steered by their own special motives and perceptions. Only dreams united them.

Ain't that America?