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ATLANTA, Ill. -- America's back roads are for people with time on their hands. Bikers. Poets. Hobos. A few journalists.

On the grounds of the Atlanta Public Library in central Illinois there's a 30-foot-tall clock tower that became a metaphor for a recent midsummer trip down old Route 66. The limestone tower's 1909 Seth Thomas clock is one of the few left in the nation that is still wound by hand. Almost all other such clocks have been converted to electricity.

Last year a group of Atlantans, known as "Keepers of the Clock," began volunteering one week at a time to wind the old landmark. Its 1,200-pound brass bell tolls each hour. During my stop in Atlanta, I got to wind the clock and was named an honorary "Keeper of the Clock."

Route 66 is one of the nation's most timeless travel destinations, especially for European, Australian and Japanese tourists. But times are changing. The number of foreign visitors on "The Mother Road" is down this summer.

Despite the personal connections for which Route 66 is famous, potential foreign tourists are hesitating to travel it -- or anywhere else in America. In May, an Australian tourist traveled Route 66 and posted this message to a related Yahoo! travel message board, attempting to explain why:

-"Coming from a place where the immigration people actually say 'good day' to you and the police don't seem to have such big guns, etc., America seems daunting."

-"We never have to pay for petrol before purchase. Not many people in service stations are behind protective screens."

-"The perception of the U.S. from outsiders especially Australia seems to be that it is a dangerous place. Right or wrong, that is the perception."

After the Travel Industry Association of America concluded its annual convention in May, its chief executive, Roger Dow, said increasing anti-Americanism has created an impression that America is inhospitable. "There's a perception of 'Fortress America' that is much worse than it really is," Dow told the Financial Times. He added that America has lost tourism dollars to Australia, Spain and Asia. "It's an economic imperative to address these problems," he said.

Then, in late July, the state of Illinois announced that its tourism hit record levels by attracting 90.6 million visitors in 2004, up 6.7 percent from 2003. But international

travel hovered around 1 million visitors, remaining below the 2000 peak of 1.37 million visitors.

So I began wondering: Who travels America today? Since there's nothing more American than Route 66, I went looking for answers at several pit stops along Route 66. The statistics tell the results, but the people themselves told the reasons -- and talking to them in person seems to be exactly why people still make this journey.

The Pig Hip Restaurant and Museum, on Route 66 in Broadwell, Ill., is no longer a restaurant, but it is one of four Route 66-related museums/hall of fames (as well as Pontiac, Ill.; the Dixie Truck Stop in Bloomington, Ill., and Lebanon, Mo.) I counted in an eight-hour drive down 66 to Springfield, Mo.

The beloved Ernie Edwards opened the Pig Hip in 1937 and closed the restaurant in 1991 -- but he's still around. At age 89, Edwards serves as the museum's curator and greeter. His giving nature symbolizes the human connection people are looking for on America's back roads. In a growing society of iPods, computers and automobile DVD players, the reward of slow travel still arrives in sharing stories with people you meet along the way.

Rob and Laura Ellis drove up from Lebanon, Ohio (outside of Cincinnati), on the morning of the day I stopped at the Pig Hip. The museum was one of their first stops along Route 66. "It's the highway of legends," Rob said of the road. His wife added, "It's the lure of doing something different. We have no game plan. We'll drive until we have to turn around."

"We may be a little younger for people coming around here," she added. She's 35. He's 42. He's in real estate and she works in a corporate division of the Ford Motor Co.

In a voice with tones of a gentle whistle, Edwards told the young couple how in 1933 Henry Ford purchased the wooden courthouse in nearby Lincoln, Ill., took the building apart piece by piece and shipped it to Detroit. In 1941, Edwards and the Pig Hip hosted fund-raisers to build a replica courthouse on the same property. The state of Illinois restored the building a few years ago. Laura Ellis smiled and said, "Henry Ford, I did not know that." A connection was made that Ellis won't soon forget.

Edwards likes to tell the story that he named his place the Pig Hip because when a hog scratches itself, it uses its right leg, which toughens the skin. Thus, the Pig Hip's ham always was used from the left side of the hog.

When Edwards opened his museum a couple of years ago, he filled the place with old clippings, an autographed picture of former TV star David Hartman and a huge collection of pig salt and pepper shakers.

"There's not as many foreign travelers as there used to be," Edwards said. "I take it that it's due to gasoline prices and money exchange. That's why one year we get all German. Another year, all Swiss. The best one I've had this year is a Mercedes Benz club from the United States. There were about 40 of them, and they had two Bentleys, two Pierce Arrows in there."

And Edwards always has his stories. He smiled at the young couple, who listened to the remembrances of old glories. They were the only visitors at the Pig Hip. "Awh, my bull, that's what it adds up to," he said. "Just mention something and we got a story for it. My stories." Edwards waved goodbye and waited for the next visitor.

The Ariston, on South Old Route 66, Litchfield, Ill. (217-324-2023), is the longest-running restaurant along the nearly 2,000 miles of Route 66. The restaurant opened in 1924 up the road on Route 4 in Carlinville. In 1935, founder Pete Adam built his new Ariston in Litchfield, about an hour north of St. Louis. Adam had heard about this new rainbow highway called Route 66.

The quaint restaurant now seats 200, including an adjacent banquet room. The walnut booths and tables are from 1935, as is a 30-foot walnut back bar trimmed out in bird's-eye maple. "The chairs are pretty new," admitted second-generation owner Nick Adam. "They're from 1938. The chairs and I are the same age."

Pete Adam was a Greek immigrant. He came to America when he was 12. Adam named his restaurant "The Ariston," as a spinoff of "Aristocrat." His son smiled. "Meaning the best," said Adam, who has operated the Ariston since 1966. It was Aristotle who said, "Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening when you'd rather have been talking."

This American back road is all the family has known for 70 years. I wondered how his father's new America differed from what Nick sees now on Route 66. Adam took his time before he replied: "I have an idea of what he went through. All those young people were full of enthusiasm. They came here because they wanted a better life. We're all immigrants in this country. The only natives are Native Indians. We tend to forget that sometimes. Maybe we're a little less tolerant now.

"After 9/11, there was a big slowdown. Now there's a resurgence. We get 3,000 foreign tourists a summer. Monday is always a big day with Europeans. Yesterday we had 12 from Germany, and they were all on motorcycles. They fly into Chicago Friday or Saturday, lay over and head out on Sunday. Foreign visitors spend two to four weeks on the road. It's a great way to see the country. I've never heard anyone verbalize they were afraid to go anywhere. But business isn't what it should be."

Adam puts in 70 hour weeks at the Ariston. A couple of years ago there were rumors the restaurant would close its doors. But Adam is now passing the business on to his 38-year-old son, Paul. "I tell my son it won't be that bad for him," he said.

"But it's brutal. There's rising expenses, and it's not related to food costs. It's insurance, utilities and everything else that adds up. The independents are reluctant to raise prices. We see the same faces every day. Some of these families have been coming here for generations. You can't pass it all on to them."

It was dinnertime at the Ariston. A local doctor was in with his family -- for the fifth time in the week. A familiar couple sat in a back booth -- Rob and Laura Ellis from Lebanon, Ohio. I told them to spend a night at the historic Munger Moss Motel on Route 66 in Lebanon, Mo. They said they would, whenever they got there. There were more stories to be shared.

"As a young boy, my earliest memories aren't quite 'Grapes of Wrath,' but I do remember people going west," Adam told me. "Everybody had water bags outside their car. I remember people wanting to work for meals. Dad never turned anybody down, but he felt if they had dignity, they should work for it. Peel potatoes or do something. It was a dangerous road. There were accidents and ambulances. Back then the early 1950s, the speed limit was whatever was reasonable and proper." That's what tourists still find on the old road: a life that is reasonable and proper.

A couple of days after I returned to Chicago, I was stuck in 9 a.m. gridlock on Adams Street (the old Route 66 since 1955, when Jackson Boulevard became one-way eastbound). A young white man sped by on a bicycle. He was in a hurry, and he quickly turned his head to his right where a cab sat in traffic.

He then spat on the cab's windshield. The cab was driven by a man of Indian descent. The cab remained stuck; the man on the bicycle continued west on America's most famous road.

Far away from the city, Route 66 is a gentle ribbon where human connection is honored from all over the world.