

Iconic Route 66: The Main Street of America



As one of the most iconic highways in all of America, Route 66 has many names to its credit. Some refer to it as the Main Street of America. Others call it the Will Rogers Highway or the Mother Road. Whatever you may personally call this most historic of roadways, it's safe to say Route 66 is nothing if not a legend.

Even so, there's probably a lot you don't know about the rich history of [Route 66](#). How long is it anyway? What makes it so historically significant and how did it come to be synonymous with concepts like freedom, adventure, and great American grit? Here we'll cover everything a dedicated road tripper ought to know about America's most beloved highway.

You can actually still drive Route 66 if you're so inclined

Officially speaking, the original Route 66 began in Chicago and wound its way west before ending in Los Angeles, California. Its 2,448-mile length consisted of numerous roads that already existed and made its way through multiple U.S. states including Texas, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, New Mexico, and Arizona.

The speedy interstates most road trippers rely on today have since rendered the once essential Route 66 obsolete. The United States government also officially decommissioned it in 1985. However, historians and avid road trippers alike can still drive quite a lot of Route 66 today if they're so inclined.

Route 66 owes one of its most famous names to John Steinbeck

If you're a literature lover, then the mere mention of Route 66 immediately brings John Steinbeck to mind, and with good reason. His Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Grapes of Wrath* doesn't just mention Route 66. It contains an entire chapter devoted to it. Steinbeck dubbed it "the mother road", a nickname still in use today.

Contrary to popular belief, Steinbeck did not actually journey along with poverty-stricken migrants like the Joads as part of his research for *Grapes*. However, he and his wife did drive west on Route 66 itself in the year 1937.

The song that made Route 66 a household name was written by a former U.S. Marine

The legendary Nat King Cole hit "(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66" is arguably as famous as the highway itself (if not more so). However, while you can no doubt hum the melody at will, you may not be as familiar with the person who wrote the catchy classic. A man named Bobby Troup actually penned it in 1946.

A Pennsylvanian by birth, Troup wrote his very first hit song while still in college and went on to serve with the illustrious United States Marines in World War II. After returning home, he decided to get serious about making a living as a songwriter and eventually dreamed up a song about iconic Route 66 while traveling along it toward California. The rest is music history!

Route 66 partially follows the Trail of Tears

You may already know the Trail of Tears as the historic route the Cherokee Indians followed after the government forcibly removed them from their home territories in 1838 via the [Indian Removal Act](#). You may not know that a portion of Route 66 actually overlaps its northernmost stretch. (The portion in question runs from Rolla to Springfield, Missouri.)

Although some of the Native American tribes left their lands peacefully, the Cherokee were among the ones that resisted. Eventually, the American military intervened and forced them to trek west to Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma. The stretch that intersects with Route 66 was one of four main removal routes used to relocate the Cherokee. However, it saw the largest number of migrating Indians by far – approximately 12,000 of the 16,000 that ultimately traveled the Trail of Tears.

Route 66 basically is what it is because of a Tulsa businessman

Oklahoma businessman Cyrus Avery is known today as the "Father of Route 66" and with good reason. He passionately championed the eventual existence of the highway and did everything in his power to promote it. Along with his family, Avery actually traveled all the way to Missouri in a covered wagon to eventually settle in Oklahoma's Indian Territory. He earned an ample living across multiple industries including real estate, farming, and oil.

Avery also eventually became an important civic leader in Oklahoma. He was an avid participant in the Good Roads Movement, which was all about improving America's highways and byways. He also helped develop several state highways and was instrumental in the decision to have

Route 66 [go through Oklahoma](#). Avery also played a large role in making the highway into an important tourist attraction, as well as getting it paved from beginning to end.

African Americans weren't always free to enjoy Route 66 to the fullest

Here in the year 2017, the days of legal segregation are long behind us. However, during the segregation era, African Americans couldn't really enjoy the Route 66 experience to the same extent everyone else could. The highway made its way through several communities known as "sundown towns", towns where black people were not welcome after dark. This naturally made it difficult for black families to find ample food, lodging, and entertainment along the way.

In 1936, a black postal worker and native New Yorker would publish a travel guide known as *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. The guide featured a selection of shops, eateries, and places to stay that were friendly and welcoming to African American tourists, taking a lot of the guesswork out of traveling the Main Street of America in the process. The guide remained in publication until 1966.

Today, Route 66 may no longer be the booming quintessential highway it once was. However, it remains an important piece of our history, not to mention the ultimate road trip destination for culture lovers. Consider planning your own historic road trip down America's most [famous and beloved highway](#) this summer! You're sure to be glad you did.