



DESERT DREAMS

Photograph by Efren Lopez/Route66Images



The year was 1952. Route 66 was at the height of its glory, and Winslow, Arizona, thrived as a bustling stop along the Mother Road. Positioned in northeastern Arizona, Winslow's strategic location on America's Main Street made it a key waypoint for travelers journeying between Chicago and Los Angeles. The town's economy, driven by a constant flow of motorists and adventurers traveling the open road, flourished with a variety of motels and hotels providing much-needed respite. Amidst this vibrant hospitality landscape, one motel emerged, destined to become the longest continually operating Route 66 motel in Winslow.

Back up a few years to 1940, and Rex James Marble and his wife, Lillian, established a motel at 512 E Third Street. They named it Marble Motel. The property underwent renovations in 1952, likely to accommodate the changing needs of post-war travelers. While much of Marble Motel's early life remains largely obscure, one thing that is for sure is that it weathered the ups and downs of the Mother Road. By the time Lee Earl and his wife, Floranel, acquired the property in 1974, it had fallen into disrepair. Floranel — the daughter of prominent Winslow merchants Wayne and Beth Troutner, known for their Wayne L. Troutner's "For Men" clothing store, a Route 66 landmark famous for its billboards along Route 66 featuring the silhouette of a curvaceous cowgirl — brought her deep connection to the community into the project. The Earls revitalized the motel, giving it a new lease on life and renaming it Earl's Motor Court.

However, like so many towns along the highway, Winslow's fortunes shifted when the Interstate bypassed the town in the late 1970s. Business slowed, and Earl's Motor Court felt the effects. But in 2006, a spark of inspiration arrived in the form of Pixar's movie *Cars*. The film reignited interest in Route 66, celebrating the road's history and the small towns that once thrived along it. Fueled by the film's success and its tribute to Route 66, the Earls set out to restore the motel's iconic glow, beginning with its neon signs, which had deteriorated due to the ravages of time and the elements. That same year, they installed new neon sign art, reviving their "Sleeping on the Corner in Winslow" slogan and rekindling the motel's historic charm.

The Earls operated the motel for many years, cementing its status as a classic Route 66 landmark. Sadly, Lee passed away in 2011 and Floranel followed in 2018. Under the Earls' stewardship, the motel had become a beloved Route 66 landmark once again, and now it was time for a new caretaker to continue its legacy. Their son, Jeb, put the property up for sale, which soon caught the eye of Winslow locals Angela and Blas Sanchez. The timing couldn't be more perfect. The Sanchezes were looking to turn a challenging situation into an opportunity following an accident that Blas had on a chicken farm.

"My husband had his leg amputated, and he got a settlement for it, so we were investing money, and we figured the best way to do that would be properties," Angela recalled. "I was driving by the motel one day and I saw that it was for sale. We were going to turn it into apartments,

but Cindy, the lady that owns the Jack Rabbit Trading Post, she's a really good friend of mine, we started talking and she asked, 'So what are you doing now?' because I used to work at Love's right near the Jack Rabbit. I said, 'Well, we bought Earl's,' and she just flipped out. She's like, 'Everybody wants to know who bought Earl's!' And that's when I told her that we were going to turn it into apartments and she was like, 'No, no. Please, please. You can't do that.'"

By the summer of 2018, the Sanchez family had taken ownership of the motel and immediately began implementing updates. They tackled everything from modernizing outdated plumbing and tiles in each bathroom to Blas painstakingly sanding down and restoring the square, princess-style porcelain bathtubs, which had accumulated 30 years' worth of enamel. Meanwhile, Angela sourced eclectic furniture and handmade quilts to give each of the eight rooms a distinctive character. Their goal was to strike a careful balance between modernization and the vintage charm that honored the motel's nostalgic history. In addition to the extensive repairs, they also faced financial challenges in managing the motel.

"We went into it with no instructions whatsoever. I have experience managing a restaurant, so there's a lot that I was able to figure out quickly, but there's other stuff that I didn't figure out so quickly, like rates. We didn't know what to charge for our rooms, so we figured, we're on Route 66, we'll do \$66 on 66," said Angela. "That's what we charged regardless of which room you had, regardless of how many people were in it. We did that for about two years. My husband still had money from his settlement up until [early 2020]. So, we were using that money, but when that ran out, we quickly realized that we couldn't pay our bills, so we've raised our rates since then."

The Sanchezes run the motor court with a personal touch, and their warmth and attention to detail have quickly established them as gracious hosts. Guests don't just enjoy a slice of Americana by staying in rooms that once welcomed cross-country adventurers decades ago; they also feel like part of the family. "It's been quite a journey, especially the guests that we've met. I'll sit and talk, and by the time it's over, I tell them, 'You know what, you come as a customer, but by the time you leave, you'll leave like part of the family,'" reflected Blas.

The motel's friendly four-legged greeter, Buffalo, also adds to the unique character of the motel. "We have a world-famous dog. This dog gets mail. He gets packages. People stop by not to rent a room, but to bring him bags of beef jerky. I mean, he gets phone calls! It's funny because we did not teach him to do this, but he'll walk you to the office, he'll walk you to your room," chuckled Angela.

The neon sign still glows, and a stay today is just as memorable as it has been throughout its long history. Earl's Motor Court remains a reminder of the highway's vibrant past, its story intertwined with the road's history, witnessing both its heyday and its gradual decline. Outliving the highway it was once built to serve, the motel continues to serve as a beacon of the friendly, welcoming spirit that defines Route 66, one check-in at a time.

