



CALIFORNIA'S ROUTE 66: Hiding in Plain Sight



Santa Monica History Museum
June 29 to October 19, 2019



Promoting Route 66 in Beverly Hills, 1938 (Santa Monica History Museum, Bill Beebe Collection 3.2.763)

Cover: Will Rogers Highway Celebration, 1952 (Ted Fach, Santa Monica History Museum Collection 36.2.228); Painted Route 66 Sign, 2012 (Courtesy Seigo Saito)

Greetings!

It is my pleasure to welcome you to our newest exhibition exploring the colorful history of Route 66 in California. The Museum's mission is centered on collecting, documenting, and preserving the history of Santa Monica—and making it accessible to the community through exhibitions and educational programs. I think this show is a perfect example of “bringing history alive,” which is how my mother and Museum co-founder Louise B. Gabriel described our work here.



Celebrated in songs, books, and movies, Route 66 holds an important place in the memory and imagination of many Americans. Starting in 1926, it served to facilitate exploration of, and migration to, our beautiful state. Some of its most famous landmarks are found here in California, and they tell the story of our country's social, economic, and cultural development. I'd like to extend a special thank you to our sponsors, our community of local collectors, and the California Historic Route 66 Association for helping make this exhibition possible.

I invite you to join us for a virtual road trip along this iconic highway that ends practically at our doorstep.

Thank you for visiting!

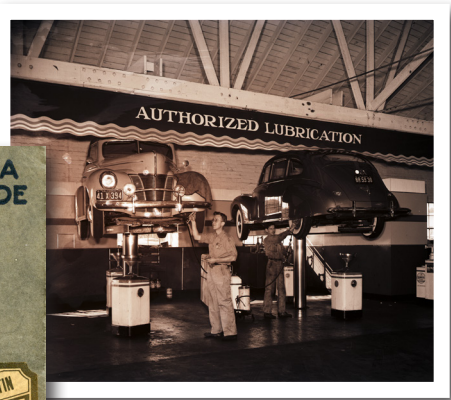
Susan Gabriel Potter

Susan Gabriel Potter, President
Santa Monica History Museum



End of the Rainbow: Route 66 in California

Since it was first declared a federal highway in 1926, Route 66 has inspired countless road trips and become an icon of Americana. Route 66 traverses 2,448 miles across eight states, connecting Chicago and Santa Monica through characterful towns and colorful attractions. From the beginning, it has symbolized American expansion, the dream (or myth) of the open road, and the promise of the golden land at the end of the road—California.

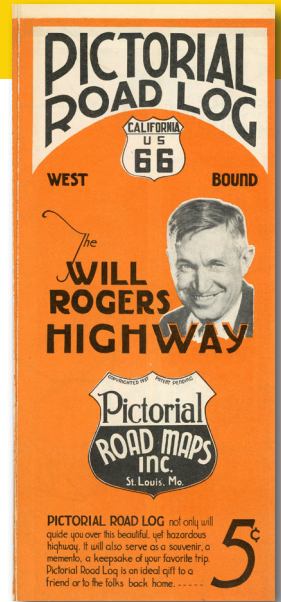


The last 315 miles of the Route pass through California, following the Old Mojave Trail through the desert to end in Santa Monica. The official end point is designated by a sign at the intersection of Lincoln and Olympic Boulevards. Although the urban section is often traveled unnoticed, more than 90% of the California portion of the Route is drivable today.

As an integral part of American expansion and migration in the 20th century, Route 66 traces the path of American history. When it was built, Route 66 absorbed most of the National Old Trails Road, America's first transcontinental road formed from the trails taken by Native Americans and early European settlers.

The Route benefited from the boom of the 1920s and promotion from prominent supporters like Will Rogers. However, it swiftly turned into a "road of flight" in the 1930s as desperate migrants fled the Oklahoma Dust Bowl to seek work in California during the Great Depression.

When road travel became more affordable to middle-class Americans, Route 66 became not just a method of transportation, but a destination itself. Its attractions, gas stations, motels, and diners were accessible and affordable to people at most income levels. The iconic road signs became inextricable from the other imagery of the road: bright neon lights, monolithic sculptures, and eccentric roadside attractions, which developed to lure travelers and their business to the small towns along the way.



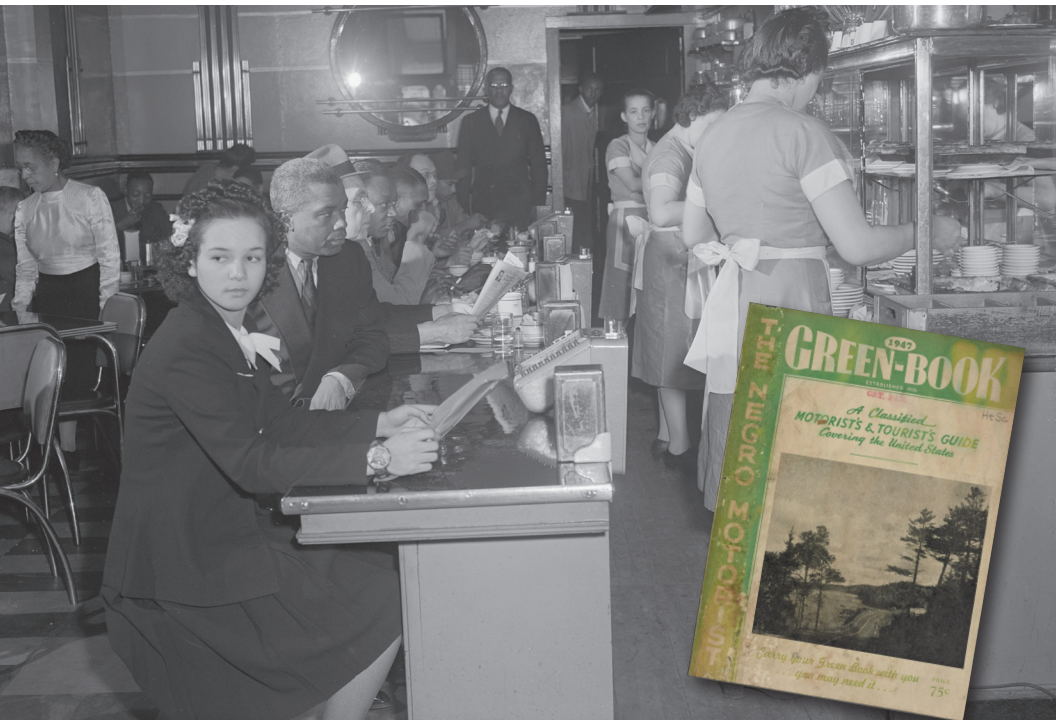
Will Rogers Highway Pictorial Road Log, 1937 (Courtesy Mike and Sharon Ward, members CHR66A); Mojave Water Camp on Route 66 in Barstow, California, 1939 (Courtesy Pomona Public Library, Frasher Foto Postcard Collection)

The Hidden History of “America’s Main Street”

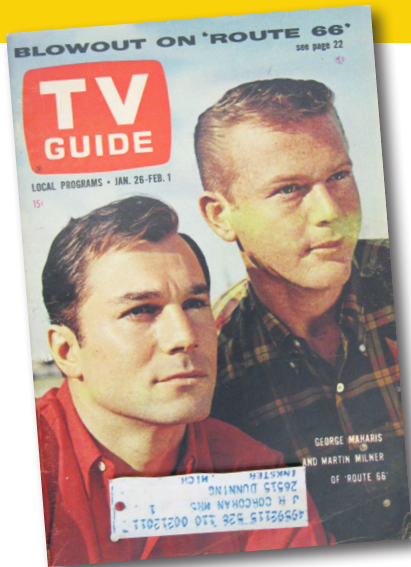
The story behind Route 66 is more complex than the alluring myth of the “open road” allows. The road was, in fact, only welcoming to specific groups, and it has struggled over the 20th century with both racism and economic decline.

During Route 66’s height, the *Green Book* enabled safer travel for African Americans by providing lists of establishments that served motorists of color in the Jim Crow era. Many towns along Route 66 were known as “sundown towns,” which imposed an unofficial curfew for black citizens. Harassment and violence were a constant threat.

First published in 1936, the *Green Book* grew to sell more than 15,000 annual copies at the height of its popularity. It continued to be published until 1966, two years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act outlawed racial discrimination and diminished the need for such guides.



The Perfect Eat Shop in Chicago, 1942 (Courtesy Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration Office of War Information Photograph Collection); *The Negro Motorist Green-Book*, 1947 (New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture)



Stories of the Route have been memorialized in popular film, literature, and art, from the rambling road trip television show *Route 66* (1960-1964, CBS) to the 2006 Disney Pixar film *Cars*, which explores Route 66's revitalization. John Steinbeck's 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* represented the desperate path of Dust Bowl migration, while Jack Kerouac later glamorized the American road trip in *On the Road* (1955). Nat King Cole's recording of "(Get Your Kicks On) Route 66" became a Billboard hit in 1946 – though at the time, he would have had trouble finding a place to stay on the Route.

Route 66 revealed the local cultures of small towns to travelers, as it provided a linked route through the centers of towns—quite literally, through America's Main Streets. The small road forced drivers to slow down and notice the places they passed. However, Route 66 was decommissioned as a federal highway in 1985 following the creation of the Interstate Highway System. Since then, the economic health of towns along Route 66 has declined dramatically as Interstates bypass towns, taking with them the economic support that travelers provide. Thanks to preservation efforts from organizations such as the California Historic Route 66 Association, however, Route 66's mythology and mystique live on.



TV Guide Featuring *Route 66* Television Show, 1963 (Courtesy the collection of John Atwater of Alta Loma, California); Beacon Tavern on Highway 66 in Barstow, 1944 (Courtesy Pomona Public Library, Frasher Foto Postcard Collection)

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Thank you to our museum members & volunteers!



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