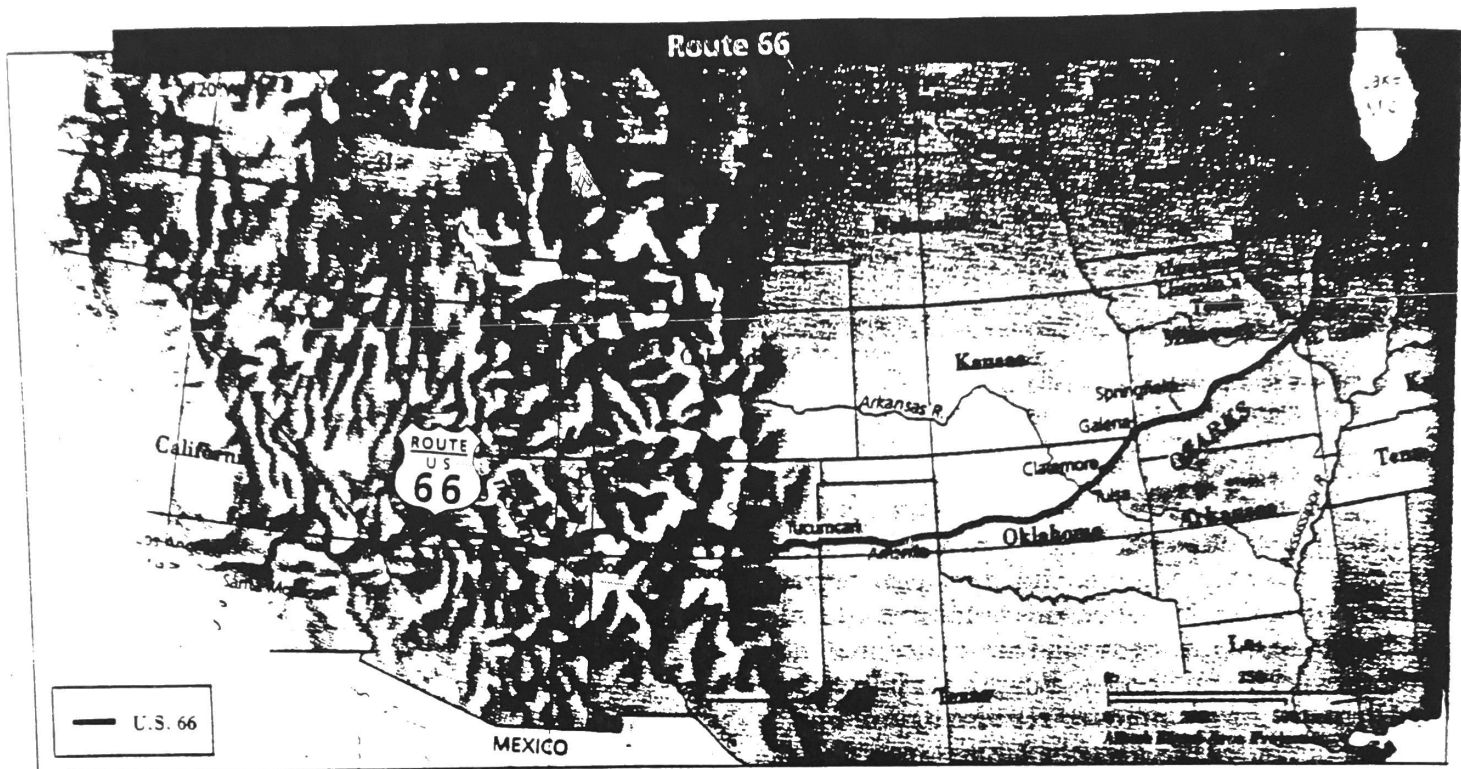


GEOGRAPHY: IMPACT ON HISTO

Route 66



Pulitzer prize-winning author James Agee described the American story as having five main characters: the continent, the people, the automobile, the road, and the roadside. According to Agee, these five characters met because of the restless nature of Americans:

The twenties made him [the American] rich and more restive still and he found the automobile not merely good but better and better. It was good because continually it satisfied and at the same time greatly sharpened his hunger for movement.

James Agee,
Fortune, September 1934

Cars alone could not satisfy the American hunger for movement. Only the construction of a

The path of Route 66 was the subject of intense negotiating as many small towns petitioned to have the road run through their community.

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One famous highway, U.S. Highway 66, allowed Americans

to fulfill their desire to take to the road. How did the U.S. highway system, including roads such as Route 66, come about?

Building the Roadway

Americans enjoyed driving their cars and soon wanted better roads on which to drive. People were interested in what Americans in other parts of the country were doing: what they ate, wore, lived in, and looked like.

Car owners and manufacturers were not the only ones demanding new roads. Since the early 1900s farmers in the Midwest and the Southwest had cried out for roads on which to transport their products to market. Farmers had been dependent on trains to freight their produce at whatever rate the railroad monopoly set.

Local political action groups

pressed Congress to legislate highway building and to break the railroad's stranglehold over transportation. In 1916 the Federal Road Act responded to the pleas of these groups. The Road Act provided federal aid for half of the construction costs of any rural highway intended to carry mail. The new state highway departments were to plan the routes of the new roads. A second federal provision in 1921 granted money to states that would connect their roads to the roads of other states, forming a main thoroughfare. These acts set the foundation for a national highway system.

When U.S. Highway 66 officially opened on November 11, 1926, it became one of the main arteries of the national highway system. This "great diagonal highway" between Chicago and Los Angeles cut through the Middle West, straddled the Great Plains, crossed the deserts of the

Southwest and reached to the very edge of the Pacific Ocean. In its 2,400-mile course, Route 66 spanned eight states and ran through 200 towns. In the late 1920s, Route 66 was an auto-tourist's vacation land.

During the Depression of the 1930s, Route 66 became famous as the road followed by migrants on their way to California in search of jobs. John Steinbeck once wrote "66 is the mother road, the road of flight."

Building the Roadside

The car and the highways provided Americans with a new form of recreation and business in the 1920s: autocamping. Millions of Americans packed tents and headed for the open countryside. Car dealers even advertised auto-tourism as a way to strengthen the family. They pictured the prosperous middle-class family travel-

ing together down Route 66 exploring the United States.

Much of the land Route 66 crossed had not experienced the same prosperity as the rest of the nation in the 1920s. The same technology that brought cars and highways also revolutionized farming with new machinery. However, when the overproduction of grains glutted the market during the 1920s, prices fell. Many farmers went bust, losing their farms as well as their jobs.

The unemployed farmers and other people who lived in rural areas were not quite sure what the new highways were, nor what businesses the highways could bring. But when Route 66 opened, they found out. Many unemployed farmers enthusiastically joined the retail petroleum business selling gasoline, oil, and other services to passing tourists. After these new entrepreneurs opened gas stations, they went on to build tourist courts and cafes where tourists could rest and try local foods. Billboards began advertising such roadside attractions as man-eating pythons. In those days any promise became fair in the battle to get the tourist to stop and spend money.



Americans enjoyed the fresh air and fellowship they found at roadside auto-camps. *What kinds of goods and services would these autotourists require?*



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THINK ABOUT IT: Today franchised service stations and restaurants line the interstates of the United States from coast to coast. How has this standardization contributed to the reduction of regional differences?