

100 Years of Route 66 in New Mexico

For 100 years, the Mother Road shaped towns, tourism, roadside culture, and everyday life across New Mexico. Historians, artists, and longtime residents reflect on its legacy.

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BY LYNN CLINE

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 In 1943, Route 66 through Albuquerque bustled with energy. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress/John Collier Jr.

THE ORIGIN STORY

When Route 66 officially opened on November 11, 1926, the roughly 2,448-mile highway linking Chicago and Los Angeles was pieced together from a patchwork of existing, mostly unpaved roads. New Mexico had 507 miles in 1926, the longest stretch in any state. With few amenities along the way, adventurous travelers had to brave meandering dirt roads that connected rural communities to major cities.

ROB MARTINEZ

New Mexico State Historian

New Mexico has always been a bit out on the edge of the world. We were on the edge of the empire under Spain and Mexico and on the edge of the world as a territory and as a state. We were always seen as exotic, otherworldly, and kind of wild. I think New Mexico had a reputation as a generous place. With Route 66, people were intrigued to come here and see cowboys, [including] Mexican cowboys and Native American cowboys and people riding horses along Route 66.

TELLER HAZIER

*Director of the **Gallup Cultural Center**, member of the Laguna-Hopi/Chippewa tribes, and lifelong participant in the **Gallup Inter-Tribal***



Indian Ceremonial

Route 66 changed the layout of Gallup. It provided for much-needed commerce and gave people access to the Native arts and crafts and railroad industries. For [early] Route 66ers, the ceremonial was a major eye-opening experience. They were engaging with the cultures that they may have heard about but never really seen up close.

FRANK NORRIS

Santa Fe–based historian

Back in the '20s, when people drove the highway, it was a dirt road. If there wasn't an auto camp that they stayed in, they pulled off to the side of the road and put up a tent. There were between 60 to 80 auto camps, all on Fourth [Street] in Albuquerque, before the 1937 alignment, and all on Central Avenue after the 1937 realignment.

⬆ Motorists got a nice welcome to New Mexico as they crossed over from Arizona in 1940. *Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress/John Marigolies.*

THE EARLY DAYS

From the 1930s to the 1950s, Route 66 was the neon-lit Main Street of America, traveled by families out to see the country. Roadside diners, motels, curio shops, and gas stations catered to every need.

MARTINEZ: When you think about the 1930s, how many people in New Mexico really had cars? Not many. But Route 66 was bringing people in both directions with cars. It really started to elevate car culture in New Mexico. It introduced roadside motels and restaurants where you could stop and get a quick meal. They started to pop up in Tucumcari and Gallup.

NO  In the mid-'30s, there was a significant bump among African Americans who had money and had time to travel. It was the first time that Black people in force felt they could take to the road. This is when the [*Negro Motorist*] *Green Book* came out, in 1936, listing restaurants, hotels, and gas stations that catered to Black travelers.

PAUL MILAN

Son of Salvador Milan, who established the town of Milan on Route 66 and, in 1946, built the log-style Milan Motel

I was born in Gallup in 1934 and moved to Grants at age seven or eight. We had a ranch right on Highway 66. The tourists were not a big deal then.

MARTINEZ: Route 66 was completely paved in 1938. That was a big deal, because a lot of New Mexico was not paved. If you were a boy in Tucumcari seeing a shiny car coming through from Chicago, you might get a sense of what life was like in other places.

CECELIA LUCERO

Acoma Pueblo tribal member, retired Laguna Pueblo elementary school teacher, and daughter of renowned potter Lucy M. Lewis

I was born right there by Route 66 in 1941. My parents had just built a house in McCartys [on Acoma Pueblo]. My mother would sell pottery by the roadside, mainly during the summer because that's when the tourists would come through. As a child, I would tag along and help her. She used to make what she called tourist pots: little bowls with clay penny circles and a scalloped edge. She would also make cigarette ashtrays.

ELMO BACA

Las Vegas, New Mexico–based former state historic preservation officer (excerpt from New Mexico Magazine, February 2001)

In its heyday, the roadway linked the fortunes of 10 substantial communities, five tribes, and nearly two dozen other small villages and hamlets.



LUCY M. LEWIS introduced to another society, different from our culture. We saw new ways of dressing, with high heels and stockings, becoming a part of our culture. It was interesting to me to meet people from another culture and to learn about the

NORRIS: During the post–World War II period, a greater number of African Americans came along, and that’s when more listings in New Mexico appeared in the *Green Book*. The funny thing about New Mexico is that the black-white duality that existed almost every place else really didn’t happen here very much. The state legislature did pass a law guaranteeing African Americans civil rights in 1955, well before the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

MILAN: Once the 66 road was paved, you could see the change. When I was in high school, my father built a motel, and we lived there and learned the business. My wife and I ran the motel for about 10 years.

ABRAHAM SANTILLANES

Tour guide and presenter in Albuquerque’s Route 66 Centennial Speaker Series

I was born in 1951, and my grandmother had just opened a retail shop on [Albuquerque’s Old Town Plaza]. My bassinet lay behind the counter. I started school at San Felipe School, which sat right on Route 66. Any traffic headed east toward Chicago or west to Los Angeles drove by our playground. In sixth grade, I became one of the crossing guard/patrol boys helping students across Route 66. I had the power to stop traffic on one of the busiest highways in America.

LUCERO: When Route 66 was put through, the land was taken away, and that had an impact on the people. My dad grew everything that we ate. When the road came through, it took a portion of his farmland, and he had to find other fields.

SANTILLANES: Thanks to Route 66, other businesses soon opened in Old Town—more shops, galleries, gift shops offering Native American arts and souvenirs. My mother opened her first shop in a very small space. At the age of 13, I worked a shift after school until about 6 p.m. I dealt with people from all over the country and, indeed, from all over the world. I was amazed how little people knew of the West and particularly of New Mexico. I can’t tell you how many times I was complimented for my English.

MARTINEZ: We look back nostalgically, through movies, songs, and TV series from the ’50s and ’60s. I grew up in Albuquerque, and my folks were here when they put in the interstate. Route 66 is one of those places that never seems to lose its allure.



THE DECLINE

The 1956 creation of the U.S. Interstate Highway System marked the end of Route 66, as new freeways slowly bypassed small roadside towns and overlaid Route 66 in many places with multilane interstates. In 1985, U.S. Route 66 was officially decommissioned, and it seemed as if the Mother Road had run its course.

DEBBIE POST

President of the East Mountain Historical Society and co-organizer of the Route 66 Centennial Speaker Series

After I-40 was completed, the small towns that continued to thrive had freeway exits and cater now to the trucking industry. Today, Edgewood, Moriarty, and Santa Rosa are still prosperous because there's still tourism. For those towns with no freeway exits, people went out of business or moved.

STEVE VATOSEOW

Co-owner and chef of Albuquerque's Lindy's Diner

We're one of the few surviving buildings on 66 in Albuquerque. Our building dates to 1906. [Editor's note: The restaurant was closed in late April due to structural concerns with the building.] It's part of our culture in Albuquerque. Generations of people grew up on that street.

FABIAN CHAVEZ

Manager of Santa Rosa's historic Pecos Theatre

Growing up in Santa Rosa, it just felt like a quiet little town. It didn't dawn on me until I started hearing from my grandparents and my parents how things change over the years and how the closing of Route 66 decreased the business downtown.



THE REVIVAL

Almost as soon as Route 66 was decommissioned in 1985, enthusiasts launched a movement to revive it. Fueled by nostalgia, interest from abroad, and younger generations, Route 66 took hold in people's hearts and imaginations. New Mexico designated its stretch of Route 66 as a National Scenic Byway in 1994, joining other states and cities in preserving and promoting this beloved highway.

POST: Funding was available for businesses or towns to restore Route 66 places, so there was a movement to restore the neon signs and kitschy things that would be targets for tourists.

CHAVEZ: The Pecos Theatre was the first building in Santa Rosa to be restored on the old Route 66. The theater opened in 1919 and had lots of owners until it closed in 2010. The county bought it in 2016 and restored it. The neon sign has gone through so many changes. Back in the '40s or '50s, it had a sign similar to what we have now. The only thing that's original is the [Mission-style, stone] front outside wall. It is an honor to have it back up and going again and to be open for another 100 years. Out-of-town people have moved here to Santa Rosa and bought the downtown buildings and turned them into cafes, art galleries, and clothing and merchandise shops.

SUMMER WILLIS

Co-owner of Albuquerque's 66 Diner and daughter of Tom and Christy Willis, who transformed the former Phillips 66 station, built in 1945, into one of the Duke City's most beloved restaurants

When my parents first opened the diner, my understanding was it was my dad's whole goal to stay as true as possible to that era, while obviously being in a new era. We're in the middle of a city that's grown up around us. We're kind of like a beacon.

VAT  I couldn't believe how many people have told me, "Oh, I met my wife here," or "This is where we had our first date." Ger... e come here. People have so many memories of it.

SH... HARAS

Owner of Albuquerque's Hotel Zazz

I was born and raised in Albuquerque. My parents are from Zanzibar. They would drive up and down Route 66 to put me to sleep because I had colic. They bought the motel that is now Hotel Zazz in '91 or '92 and ran it as University Lodge. It was my mom's dream to own a motel. When I saw my parents getting tired, I thought, *What can we do to preserve and promote this place instead of selling it?* It's important that we're keeping this place and seeing another generation carry on this legacy.

THE CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

Cities and towns across the state have organized an array of festivities, from parades and parties to classic car shows, concerts, and cruises to keep the Mother Road's heartbeat alive.

MOLLY MENDENHALL

Los Lunas artist who created the mural Mother Road Coming into Color at the New Mexico History Museum in Santa Fe

The mural is about the first highway in the United States that allowed people to move across vast amounts of states. It changed the landscape that it went through. I want people to have their interest piqued about what Route 66 means to those who grew up with it. I want people to be reminded of what it's like to be on the open road with big skies. [Albuquerque's Route 66] has always been and continues to be an area that cultivates creative types and small businesses.

LETICIA ROMERO

Chef and owner of Isleta Grill and member of Isleta Pueblo



We see a lot of people from all over, traveling through on 66 or going down the road to camp. People come in and say, "It's comforting to eat something my mom or grandma used to make." We elevate the food just a bit, enough to bring people in for food that gives them a back-in-the-day flavor with mom's touch. They're happy and they're full.

SHELLE SANCHEZ

Arts and culture director for the city of Albuquerque, which led the public art project Route 66 Remixed

Our choice of murals and augmented reality, to me, are blending present-day forms with future forms. What we're trying to do is launch a celebration of the next 100 years.

POST: Route 66 has its own cultural significance. In American culture, Route 66 represents magic, freedom, and seeing new things. It's got a vibe.

MARTINEZ: The Mother Road helped make us who we are today. I'm so glad that whoever decided to put Route 66 through New Mexico did that.

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