

ROUTE 66: THE NEXT GENERATION HITS THE ROAD

Terri Ryburn-LaMonte
Illinois State University

In 1926 construction began on an American institution—Route 66. Upon completion, the highway “reached across more than 2,400 miles, three time zones, and eight states”¹ from Chicago to Santa Monica. In time, Route 66 became a symbol of America’s heritage of travel and of our desire to make a better life for ourselves by moving west. The road was especially important to rural areas. Many small, sleepy towns came to life as the road snaked its way through them. Restaurants, gas stations, truck stops, and other businesses sprang up along the road to accommodate the business travelers and vacationers who traveled Route 66. As American grew, with the resulting demand for faster and safer roads, the original two-lane road was replaced by a four-lane highway that closely paralleled the first. This new road generally skirted towns, so some businesses moved closer to the road; others counted on the “Business Route 66” signs to funnel traffic off the new four-lane and into their places of business. Eventually, this four-lane highway was replaced by an even more efficient, and impersonal, pavement: the Interstate. Some towns survived this change better than others.

Recently, there has been a grass roots resurgence of interest in the road. As a Route 66 enthusiast, I decided to conduct an interdisciplinary colloquium in which honors students at Illinois State University would learn the history of the road as well as study material and popular culture associated with the route. Students would also conduct oral histories with people who lived or worked along the road and compile the interviews into a book. (Students signed a Copyright Release form which meant that any proceeds from the sale would be designated for honors scholarships.) Although taught at the college level, this course on the social history of an American highway could be adapted easily for a high school United States history course or an interdisciplinary course in American history.

In the fall of 1991, 25 honors students enrolled in my course titled “Route 66: 1926 to the Present.” Most of the students were between eighteen and twenty-one years old; there were three non-traditional (25 years or older) students in the course. Their majors ranged from English to History to Accounting and Communication.

I began the course by talking about my interest in Route 66 that began at the age of five, in 1953, when my family traveled the road from Illinois to California. Personal anecdotes seemed especially effective at conveying the mystique of Route 66, and prepared the students for the interviews they would conduct with people who had traveled the road.

During the early class sessions, students were taught about the history of roads in America, beginning with the Native American and buffalo trails that preceded European settlement. They learned about the muddy, often impassable, National Road that began in Maryland in 1803 and reached Vandalia, Illinois, in 1840. I covered the Federal Aid Acts and Laws and spent time discussing the “Father of Route 66,” Cyrus Avery of Oklahoma.

¹Michael Wallis, *Route 66: The Mother Road* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 1.

Avery was appointed the state highway commissioner of Oklahoma in 1923 and was the first chairman of the State Highway Commission that laid out the state highway system. He was also the leader of the American Association of State Highway officials. At their 1924 meeting, they proposed that the Secretary of Agriculture select and designate a comprehensive system of interstate routes. As a result, Avery was chosen to lay out and create what would be known as the United States Highway System. On November 11, 1926, a committee of federal and state highway officials met in Pinehurst, North Carolina, and signed documents that made Route 66 official.²

The new highway passed through Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and finally California. The pavement was poured in six to ten-inch slabs across two lanes, each nine-feet wide. Route 66 funneled wealthy Midwesterners to magical vacation spots and desperate Dust Bowl refugees to hoped-for jobs on the West Coast. The road later became four lanes and served as a major military corridor during World War II, which, ironically, may have been the origin of its decline in importance. General Dwight Eisenhower (soon to be President of the United States) was said to have been so impressed with the speed and efficiency of traffic on the German Autobahn that he determined to replace American highways with superhighways to be called interstates.³

I frequently began or ended the class period by asking students to write essays on topics designed to stimulate their thinking about the road and/or personal experiences related to the road. This activity also gave me useful insight into their thoughts. For instance, the first assignment was to write about "My First Car Ride." Another essay required them to write about the day they got their driver's license, which proved for many to have been a nerve-wracking experience.

We were fortunate to have Tom Teague, author of *Searching for 66*,⁴ as a guest speaker. The book was required reading for the students because it dealt with two important topics: Tom's own journey along the road in 1985 and interviews he conducted. It was very helpful for the students to be able to ask him questions about the situations and people he encountered along the road and his experiences in collecting oral history. Hearing Tom's story gave them confidence in their ability to conduct their own interviews.

One class period was devoted to showing the movie, "The Grapes of Wrath," based on the John Steinbeck novel. John Ford directed the movie, which effectively captured the desperation of the 1930s Dust Bowl refugees as it focused on the Joad family and their flight from poverty and near-starvation in Oklahoma. The movie follows them along Route 66, contrasting their hopes of employment and a better life in California with a realistic portrayal of the experiences of many nameless, faceless others who traveled the

²Susan Croce Kelly, *Route 66: The Highway and Its People* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 12-13.

³Wallis, 25.

⁴Tom Teague, *Searching for 66*, (Springfield, IL: Samizdat House, 1991).

road in search of salvation. The black and white photography by Gregg Toland created "sweeping panoramas of the dustbowl road-scape [that] have a bleak grandeur."⁵

I wanted my students to experience a ride along the entire highway in Illinois. Students had been prepared through lectures and guest speakers for the sights they would see. They were not quite as well prepared for the physical hardships encountered on such a long trip. Early one morning, we left in a van for Chicago, returned to Normal for lunch, and then left immediately for St. Louis. We stopped at various historical places along the way, including the Welco Truck Stop in Joliet, Funk's Grove, and the Cozy Dog Restaurant in Springfield. The Welco Truck Stop impressed the students but not necessarily in a positive way. One student wrote:

... most of the group went to encounter the slovenly waitress. I went into the gas station office instead, past smoking truckers sitting around a grimy table watching TV. The restrooms were down a long, dark hallway that wound deep into the building. Foul propositions on the wall above the urinals invited me to knock on the third stall door and ask for Bubba. I didn't.⁶

Fortunately, our stop at the Cozy Dog Restaurant turned out to be a very pleasant experience as students met the famed Ed "Cozy Dog" Waldmire:

Arms flailing wildly, he flagged us to a stop in front of the restaurant. Warily, I stepped down from the van with the fear that this energetic little man would pick me up and swing me around in his excitement. Inside the Cozy Dog, he showered us with little presents—notebooks, maps, pencils—all bearing the Cozy Dog logo, of course. I can definitely say that Ed Waldmire was one of Route 66's true characters.⁷

We also saw the Chain of Rocks Bridge crossing the Mississippi River into Missouri before heading back. After a brief stop at the Illinois Route 66 Hall of Fame at the Dixie Truck Stop in McLean, we returned to Normal just after midnight. Perhaps because of the length of time they spent on this trip and the level of discomfort produced by bouncing around in the van, students who went along on the field trip "bonded" with each other and with the images of earlier Route 66 travelers. Students wrote an essay about their bone-rattling experience and the images it provoked. One said:

⁵Mark Williams, *Road Movies: The Complete Guide to Cinema on Wheels* (New York: Proteus Publishing Company, Inc., 1982), 66.

⁶Scott McCullough, in-class writing assignment, 1991.

⁷Susan Fitzgerald, in-class writing assignment, 1991.

As we were taking our trip, I tried to imagine what it would have been like to travel on 66 in the 1940s and '50s, and I tried to piece the road back together with what I knew about it, in order to make the picture complete. I couldn't help but feel anger for people who don't let anything stand in the way of "progress." They tear down old houses to make way for gas stations and parking lots. They tear down interesting old buildings to make way for corporations enclosed in glass and steel. And they push aside old highways like 66 in exchange for a way we can get somewhere faster. In doing so, highways have lost the human aspect that used to be so important to people. No one is anyone's neighbor anymore because they don't have time to stop and talk. No one notices the scenery anymore because they're driving by too fast. That's why most of the new interstates just cut through the land instead of following the hills and dips and plains that make it interesting and beautiful. I can understand the need to get somewhere quickly sometimes, but why are we *always* hurrying today? I think that now I understand why people are still so fascinated by Route 66. People miss going a little slower and being able to stop and talk to people along the road. They miss *real* people; not the robots in McDonald's uniforms, programmed to say certain things. And they miss the feeling of adventure that the land has always brought with it.⁸

Another major activity for the class involved oral history, an historical research method that records the spoken memories of eyewitnesses to events. These memories are important to the understanding of events and their effect upon the people who experienced them.

I trained the students in oral history collection, beginning with such basics as tape recorder operation and selection of cassette tapes, as well as how to set up the interview, establish rapport, ask open-ended questions, etc. Students were referred to the *Oral History Guide* by Elizabeth Bryant Merrill⁹ for further guidance. Some students had family members or friends whom they would be able to interview; those students who did not were assigned a person. Because of time and geographic restrictions, our interviews were limited to people who had lived or worked along the route in Illinois, although some interviews were conducted with those fortunate individuals who had used the road for vacation purposes.

After learning about the history and popular culture of the road, students compiled a list of questions to use as an outline for the interviews. These questions included:

⁸Lori Erickson, in-class writing assignment, 1991.

⁹Elizabeth Bryant Merrill, *Oral History Guide* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing Company, 1985).

- What memories do you have of your first trip on Route 66?
- Why did you travel on Route 66 and how did the new interstate affect this?
- When was the last time you were on Route 66? For what reason?
- In what ways has Route 66 changed or influenced your life?
- Why do you think Route 66 is so important to many people?
- Was there any one experience that happened on 66 that stands out in your mind?

Students were told not to read the list to the interviewee but to use it as an outline to guide the interview.

A total of 41 interviews were conducted by the 25 students. Students found that they formed friendships with those people whom they interviewed; one student in particular made many trips to a nursing home to visit her new friend. Another student interviewed her father, an Illinois State policeman who spent his entire 27-year career on Route 66. She gained an insight into his life as well as her own:

... I learned about Route 66, but I discovered something about myself as well... I know how much his life was affected by his experiences on Route 66. As a child, I remember my father being gone on Sundays, holidays, at night, and in bad weather. I know about the nights he didn't sleep because he had witnessed a bad accident. And now, I understand.¹⁰

Students were warned that transcribing would be the hardest part of the process, requiring many hours of uninterrupted tedium and concentration. Even with repeated warnings, many of them put off the transcribing until the last minute, which was reflected in the quality of their transcription. Once the interview was transcribed, students then had to edit it into a coherent and useful document. "How to" sheets were provided to help in this process.

Students participated in other classroom activities as well. They were given a form with the outline of a t-shirt and asked to create a design that incorporated images of Route 66, Illinois State University, and the honors colloquium. This proved to be a very popular exercise and even those who claimed no artistic ability turned in crudely-drawn but well-thought out designs.

Another project involved Burma Shave jingles. Burma Shave, a brushless shaving cream, was advertised by the unique marketing technique of placing a set of six rhyming 1'x3' signs at 100-foot intervals along Route 66 and other highways. The literary quality of the signs varied, but they were generally corny, utilizing folk humor and wit. Contests were held beginning in the early 1930s, with a prize of \$100 for a rhyme selected for use by

¹⁰LaWanda Henry, in-class writing assignment, 1991.

Burma Shave.¹¹ Students were given examples of the 1927 through 1963 signs and a form with spaces for them to write two of their own sets. For instance, two original Burma Shave signs read:

Riot at/drug store/calling all cars/100 customers/99 jars/Burma Shave
(1936)¹²

and

When you lay/those few cents down/you've bought/the smoothest/shave
in town/Burma Shave (1953)¹³

The students thought up their own signs, including:

The lights may be dim/the mood/just right/but a stubbly face/brings an
early 'good night!'/Burma Shave¹⁴

And as a reflection of the changing status of women:

Women have always/been deprived/now we can gloat/we've finally
arrived/Burma Shave/for women¹⁵

Burma Shave finally was sold to Philip Morris in 1963, and in 1964 a set of signs was given to the Smithsonian, which declared "Shaving Brushes/You'll Soon See 'Em/On the Shelf/In Some Museum," a fitting epitaph for an art form that provided pleasure for motorists for so many years.¹⁶

In another activity students role-played the part of a business owner along the recently by-passed old Route 66. They were divided into small groups and asked to devise ways to lure business off the road and into their town. Students were especially intrigued by this exercise as they took on the role of gas station, motel, or restaurant owner who must find ways to revitalize the town and their own businesses. Students gained valuable insight into the dilemma faced by those in this position and they offered creative ideas for this

¹¹Frank Rowsome, Jr., *The Verse by the Side of the Road: The Story of the Burma Shave Signs and Jingles* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), 24.

¹²*Ibid.*, 82.

¹³*Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁴John Duffy, in-class writing assignment, 1991.

¹⁵Amy Bosse, in-class writing assignment, 1991.

¹⁶Rowsome, 67.

revitalization. They understood why towns might want to "cash in" on the current Route 66 nostalgia boom, which includes motor tours, festivals, etc.

When the course was over I extended an invitation to the students to continue working with me to edit the interviews into the book; four students volunteered, and named the manuscript *Route 66: Illinois Remembers*. These students have been especially faithful to the project, helping to edit the interviews as well as collect additional information as necessary. One student described the process:

Over several semesters we tunneled through a mountain of transcripts and other assorted resources, hoping to divine some understanding from and impose some order on the mass of materials we had collected. The effort to do so is staggering: with nearly 1000 single-spaced pages of transcripts to study, we spent over a month just cataloguing and summarizing the interviews . . . None of the chapters evolved as we had anticipated. Writing around other people's words required a delicate touch. Too much narration on our part stifled their voices, while too little narration left them floating in space and time.¹⁷

The book is in the final editing stages, maps and photographs are being selected, and a query letter found three publishers willing to read the manuscript.

On the first day of class, when faced with traditional-aged students, I had some doubts about the success of the course. How could I communicate something to them that they had not experienced? But, of course, that is what all historians must do. It did, indeed, prove to be challenging; it was also extremely rewarding. Besides providing students with historical information, and the practical and very useful skill of conducting interviews, I tried to be creative in my approach, incorporating fun activities such as writing, t-shirt design, Burma Shave jingles, and small group exercises in the course. In addition, I was able to watch the students "bond" with each other and with their interviewees. A side effect, which I had not considered, was intergenerational: the opening up of dialogue between the students and their parents and grandparents, who remembered Route 66, or a road for which they felt similar affection. Students reported that their parents called to ask what they had learned in class that week and to share stories of their own about cruising, drag racing, and road trips. Students discovered a common bond with their parents, which, in some cases, surprised them both.

Students became introspective and contemplative as they considered their current "in a hurry" lifestyles. Commenting on the mystique of Route 66, one said:

Route 66 is much more than just pavement. More than just a go-between, Route 66 is a place to go. For years, I have traveled [Interstate]

¹⁷McCullough, in-class writing assignment, 1991.

55 and other highways and turnpikes, feeling extreme satisfaction with the speed and convenience of my trips. However, looking back at the history of Route 66, I now wonder what it is we are missing by opting for the non-stop method. The answer to that question appears in the faces and words of the people whose lives were touched by the route. After reading about and talking to these people, I find myself, an outsider, removed by both time and locale, caught up in Route 66.¹⁸

Another student commented on the legacy of the road:

For some, it was a road of dreams. For others, it was more than that. It was a road that had many meanings . . . because of the aura that 66 has projected over the years, it is a road that will *never* die. The mystique and vision of old 66 will linger in the minds of current generations, and generations to come, and because of this, stories of escape, salvation, vacation, exploration, and trips from here to there will live on as well.¹⁹

I am encouraged about the future of the road. The "torch" has been passed as the next generation "hits the road."

A Selective Bibliography on Route 66

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¹⁸Amy Shelton, in-class writing assignment, 1991.

¹⁹Jason Berke, in-class writing assignment, 1991.