

ROUTE 66 IN ILLINOIS

ROUTE 66: THE HEARTBEAT OF AMERICA'S HIGHWAY CULTURE

Route 66 stands as the most famous road in America, forever etched in the nation's cultural imagination. Generations of travelers have romanticized it as a symbol of boundless freedom and the spirit of the open road. Its iconic status has only grown through the countless songs, books, films and works of art that depict it as the heart of America's highway culture.

Established in 1926 as part of the newly created numbered highway system, Route 66 quickly became the preferred route for those heading west in a country on the move. While it wasn't as old or as lengthy as other transcontinental routes, like the Yellowstone Trail or Lincoln Highway, Route 66 quickly earned its reputation as the shortest year-round route connecting the Midwest to the West Coast. It carved its path through the breathtaking American Southwest, bringing the once-isolated region into the economic fold. This slender ribbon of asphalt made the American West accessible to anyone with a car, transforming it from a distant frontier into an integral part of the nation.

Throughout its existence, Route 66 witnessed the evolution of American transportation, from the slow, bumpy journeys of Ford Model Ts navigating rutted dirt paths to the rise of the mighty Interstate Highway System. As the most well-known road in a vast national network of public highways, Route 66 played a crucial role in uniting a sprawling and diverse country, helping to make it feel more connected and cohesive.

At its peak, Route 66 mirrored the changing moods of the nation. During the Great Depression, it became the "Road of Flight" for farm families fleeing the devastation of the Dust Bowl. In his seminal novel "The Grapes of Wrath," John Steinbeck famously dubbed it the "Mother Road," a title that endures to this day. This mass migration was just one chapter in the ongoing story of human movement across the nation. Another significant chapter unfolded after World War II, when thousands of veterans and their families flocked to California, drawn by the promise of jobs and prosperity in the booming West.

TRAVEL THE MOST FAMOUS ROAD IN THE WORLD!

The first light of dawn stretches across the horizon, casting bands of gold and orange into the sky. The air is crisp with the promise of adventure. You finish packing the last of your travel bags into the car, the scent of fresh coffee lingering in the air, and with a deep breath, you slowly close the trunk. **It's time to hit the road.**

The iconic National Highway System and our deep-rooted love for spontaneous road trips would not be what they are today without the legendary Route 66. Route 66 symbolizes the spirit of freedom, discovery and the American dream. Today, we pay homage to its storied past

by living adventurously in the present – by embracing the endless horizon and the open road.

The Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway is the heart of that journey, representing the diverse American culture that shaped this iconic route. With every turn, you travel through time, experiencing history as generations before you did – on the open road. From the early days of car travel to the bustling era of road trip culture, Route 66 is a living testament to the joys and challenges of exploration.

As you drive the Mother Road, it's clear: The memories you make aren't just about reaching the final destination – they're found in the moments between pit stops, the unexpected detours and the fascinating encounters along the way. For many, the journey becomes just as memorable as the destination, with Illinois Route 66 offering plenty of surprises and timeless charm.

The road truly comes alive as you explore the iconic landmarks and quirky roadside attractions that dot the byway. From vintage diners and old-fashioned motels to nostalgic museums and eccentric roadside curiosities, you'll find yourself constantly pulled into the heart of history and Americana. Each stop invites you to slow down, take it all in, and engage with the local culture, whether it's sampling a slice of homemade pie at a classic diner or striking up a conversation with a friendly local who's been a part of the route's history for years.

But the question remains: Which moment will be your favorite? Is it the thrill of driving down endless stretches of open road, the hum of tires on pavement, or the stories and faces you meet along the way? One thing's for sure, the journey down Illinois Route 66 will stay with you long after you've returned home, its timeless spirit echoing in your heart as you dream of the road ahead.

BEHIND THE WHEEL: ROUTE 66 IN ILLINOIS

Route 66 is arguably the most iconic road in the world, a symbol of American culture and adventure. Its legendary status was solidified through countless books, songs and films that immortalized it as the heart of America's road-trip culture.

For many, Route 66 was more than a road, it was a pathway to new beginnings, a place where people could break free from the constraints of everyday life and find inspiration.



Today, many of the tangible relics of this historic route have been carefully preserved, inviting travelers to step back in time and experience a slice of American history. In 2005, Illinois Historic Route 66 was designated a National Scenic Byway, cementing its place as an essential part of the nation's cultural heritage. Since then, organizations like the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway have worked tirelessly to create historic markers, visitor guides, museums and interpretive exhibits that highlight the road's significance.

As people return to the open road, Route 66 offers a revival of the thrill of pedal-to-the-metal travel. Visitors today can immerse themselves in the vibrant history of the Mother Road, experiencing firsthand the legacy of one of the most beloved highways in American history.

THREE ALIGNMENTS: THE EVOLUTION OF ROUTE 66

While Route 66 has long been a symbol of America's cultural identity, it has never been a static entity. Instead, it has continually adapted, reflecting the changing landscape of transportation and American history. As the vehicles that traveled on the Mother Road evolved, so did the pavement itself. Illinois, in particular, has worked to preserve the story of Route 66 through the conservation of three distinct alignments. Each segment offers a glimpse into the evolution of both the automobile and the travelers who journeyed along this historic highway.



66 1926-1930: THE BIRTH OF ROUTE 66

Though Route 66 was officially designated in 1926, the groundwork for the highway had already been laid with State Bond Issue 4 in 1924. SBI 4 used existing roads and was paved to create an all-weather route connecting Chicago to St. Louis, making Illinois the first state to boast a fully paved Route 66 from end to end. The 1926 alignment follows this original route. During this time, Prohibition, which ran from 1920-1933, was in full effect, and an all-weather highway allowed the illegal transportation of alcohol to flow more freely across the state. Distilleries in central and southern Illinois could easily send shipments of alcohol along Route 66 to speakeasies in Chicago and St. Louis. Some of the original pavement, laid between 1922 and 1924 as part of SBI 4 and later incorporated into Route 66, is still in use today. This stretch is characterized by a road width of only 18 to 20 feet and an average speed of 25 mph, where travelers shared the road with horse-drawn carts and tractors. Mechanical issues were frequent with the newer technology of the time, and for this reason, this alignment passes through numerous small towns.

66 1930-1940: A ROAD OF RUM RUNNERS AND EXPANSION

The rum-running era flourished until Prohibition was repealed in 1933. As cars became faster, with top speeds ranging from 60 to 80 mph, the need for safer, more efficient highways grew. During this period, states began setting speed limits, and the road earned the nickname "Bloody 66" due to its notorious accident rates. By 1936, the section of Route 66 between Chicago and St. Louis had become the busiest long-distance highway in the state, prompting a significant rerouting of the road. Larger, more congested communities like Springfield and Joliet were bypassed to accommodate the growing traffic. By 1940, a maximum speed limit of 70 mph was established. It was also during this time that picnic and rest areas were recognized as essential for long-distance travelers.

66 1940-1977: WARTIME TO INTERSTATE EXPANSION

In June 1940, as World War II raged in Europe, President Franklin D. Roosevelt commissioned a study of the nation's highways for defense needs. The "Highways for National Defense" report identified Route 66 as a crucial part of the strategic transportation network, vital for transporting military personnel, equipment and munitions. The next major redesign occurred in 1951, surpassing all previous changes since 1928. The 1956 Highway Act sparked the creation of the Interstate Highway System, which eventually replaced Route 66 as the primary route to the West. Many sections of Route 66 were absorbed into Interstate 55 by the end of 1956. By 1977, Route 66 was declared obsolete in Illinois, as most of its path had been replaced by the new interstate system. The last Route 66 sign was removed on January 17, 1977, and the entire route was officially decommissioned on June 27, 1985.

Through these three distinct alignments, Illinois preserves the story of the Mother Road's evolution – from its early days as a rough, dirt road to its later life as a vital artery of American transportation.

THE ILLINOIS ROUTE 66 SCENIC BYWAY

Illinois Route 66 holds special significance, recognized in 2005 by the U.S. Department of Transportation as a National Scenic Byway. The Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway's mission is to enhance and promote economic opportunities for each Illinois Route 66 community by preserving Illinois Route 66 heritage and increasing cultural tourism.

The Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway proudly serves more than 90 communities in Illinois, stretching from Chicago all the way to the historic Chain of Rocks Bridge. The work of the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway is focused on helping these attractions, local businesses and towns take full advantage of their rich Route 66 resources to ensure they provide the best possible experience for visitors from near and far. The organization also provides vital resources and information to travelers to help them plan their perfect road trip adventure.

To learn more about Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway and its efforts, or to plan your own unforgettable Illinois Route 66 road trip adventure, please visit illinoisroute66.org.

