

A Fork in the Mother Road

A fork in the Mother Road – – The Mother Road! It's still with us – – just like, maybe, your mother, or your grandmother. Kinda small, maybe, kinda quiet now, and maybe, sometimes, kinda forgotten.

But ohh, the life she lived, and the things she did, and the places she went! Once upon a time! There are lots of songs and stories and books about the Mother Road, and a TV Show. The Mother Road made fundamental contributions to our nation's history, much of which is now being forgotten. But the Mother Road is still there.

The Mother Road got her name from a writer of fiction – – a guy named John Steinbeck. He wrote a book called *The Grapes of Wrath* in the 1930s about a fictional family he named the Joads. The Joads were Okies, which meant they were living in a hardscrabble part of Oklahoma, and were hard-pressed by the Great Depression; and their farm and their lives were being taken away by banks and corporations and so there warn't nothing they could do but pile all their belongings and their little furniture on the top of their Nash auto-mobile, and hit the road, heading west, for salvation, in California; the Western Migration! Mother Joad tried to keep everything and everybody goin', but then she died. That book is where the term Mother Road came from, and for over 70 years the term and the book have been fundamentally important to English literature courses.

And The Mother Road is famous in music! The singer Nat King Cole laid it out:

Well if you ever plan to motor west
Just take my way that's the highway that's the best
Get your kicks on Route sixty six!

Well it winds from Chicago to L.A.
More than two thousand miles all the way
Get your kicks on Route sixty six

It goes from St. Louie down through Missouri
Oklahoma City looks mighty pretty
You'll see Amarillo and Gallup, New Mexico
Flagstaff, Arizona don't forget Winona
Kingman, Barstow, San Bernadino

Would you get hip to this kindly tip
And go take that California trip
Get your kicks on Route sixty six!

Route 66 – – the highway some folks think is dead and gone – –is still alive and still kicking. This historic ribbon of asphalt and concrete has appeared in several incarnations since its birth in 1926. It has endured the wrath of nature and human abuse and neglect. The old road also survived the late-arriving competition of five interstate highways that, in some ways, have taken its place.

Route 66 became part of popular culture, something no other highway can claim. There is still a deep, some say even subconscious, reason for the highway's abiding fame. Route 66 runs from the corner of Michigan Avenue and Adams Street here in Chicago across two thirds of the continent to the Pacific shore. Route 66 exhibits, and is, much of our nation's history. It includes the old Pontiac Trail, the Osage Indian Trail, the Wire Road, the Postal Highway, the Ozark Trail, the Mormon Trail, the Will Rogers Highway. Route 66 expresses, to anyone who will look and learn, who we are, where we live, what we do, and what we have become.

Route 66 is a museum of commercial archaeology, diverse natural and fabricated roadside distractions and attractions, and gentle curves tailor-made for vehicles...how 'bout you motor west on a Harley-Davidson Electra Glide Ultra Classic motorcycle? ...That Harley pillion seat will need to be set just right so your Main Squeeze can hug you tight for that whole 2000 miles on the way. I know where you can get one, all shined up, for just \$15,000.

Or you and your Main Squeeze can do Route 66 in a classic 1963 Corvette Stingray. To do it really right, you ought to do it like the star of the TV show titled Route 66. (The star was

really named Todd). Todd and his buddy Buz met adventure, love, crime and drama once a week over three years from 1960 through 1964, on a 16 inch black-and-white TV screen, on CBS.

Now if you are going to meet adventure, love, crime and drama, your Corvette ought to be dressed in the classic Holiday Red color. You need to get a Chevy big block 572 hp engine with chrome pipes and Muncie four speed transmission. And be sure the raydio is the original five-button -- a.m. only, so you can listen as you drive all night to the Grand Old Opry on WSM from Nashville Tennessee. I know where you can get this gem for only \$75,000. See me after.

(((((((I know time and new Interstate 55 and other highways have passed Route 66 by. Two narrow lanes have morphed into four lanes, and four lanes have morphed into eight. But some of the original two-lane sections of the Route 66 roadway are still there. You can find them, and you will be surprised and enchanted.)))))

Stories about Route 66 are as much about people who are connected to Route 66 as Route 66 is connected to those people. My first road trip up and down Route 66 was when, at 16, I got my driver's license and my mother decided she and I would visit her parents in St. Louis. I carefully drove the whole 300 miles from Chicago, and when we arrived my grandfather asked what my top speed was. I dutifully answered 60 miles an hour. "Pish," he said, "there's no speed limit on Route 66. Put the pedal to the metal! I know that DeSoto will do 90 miles an hour all day long."

On the return trip, I pondered that advice as we drove northeast from St. Louis up to the Chain of Rocks Bridge which carried Route 66 across the Mississippi River. I dutifully paid the \$0.65 toll and started across the bridge. The 1924-era bridge is narrow, and the bridge deck is not paved. It comprises, rather, a latticework of steel beams which provide a bumpy ride and also permit the travelers to look straight down through the bridge to the mighty Mississippi flowing beneath the tires of your car. It has, yes, a fork in it about one third of the way across to the Illinois side. As I approached the abrupt forked turn, a large, wide, truck approached from the opposite direction. I stopped. The truck stopped. The truck driver waved me on. I declined, unable to escape the mental image of my first auto accident pitching my mother and myself and the truck into the river. I put the car in reverse and backed up all the way up over to the Missouri side and the tollbooth. The truck driver passed, waved and sped off. As I started back across the bridge, the toll keeper stepped out in front of the car and demanded another \$0.65 toll.

This was my first encounter with an unjust legal system. I explained to the toll keeper that I had already paid my \$0.65 toll. He replied that he was required to collect tolls, not for using the bridge or starting across the bridge but rather for passing his tollbooth. Since I was about to pass the tollbooth again, I owed another \$0.65. I waved my arms: Why this government intervention in my right to travel? Where was freedom? There's something in the U.S. Constitution about this! He remained adamant. This yer ain't free he replied. Mother sighed, dug up \$0.65, paid the toll, and off we went.

(((((Route 66 has inspired, and will continue to inspire, generations of under-age lawyers, writers, poets, musicians, photographers and artists who make this highway the subject of their work.)))))

Many people who love the Mother Road remain near their sections of the Mother Road. They are in Bloomington, Edwardsville, Jolla, Rolla (that's a mispronunciation and misspelling of Raleigh, North Carolina), Fort Leonard Wood, Riverton, Vinita, Clinton, Shamrock, Vega, Tucumcari, Gallup, Lebanon, Needles, Arcadia, and all the other towns and cities and wide spots on the road. These people run convenience stores and souvenir shops. They have refurbished an abandoned home here or repurposed a forgotten building there; and they have turned it into a local restaurant, or a bed-and-breakfast, or an antique haven. They are still serving up old-fashioned meat-and-potato meals with homemade rolls and pies; and they offer lighter fare for the health-conscious. They may have left a customary career behind to bring back to life a historic theater or a curio shop or a mom-and-pop motel – of singular appearance. See the Rattlesnake Museum and Mo-tel near Amarillo Texas.

In some places Old Route 66, now just the original two-lane highway, slumbers and extends past... three silos and two grain elevators and a rusted elevator tipple and a bereft store and an orphaned house and an old cottonwood tree, standing like a watchful mother above it all.. An owl's noontime nap is being disturbed by a woodpecker hammering on a leafy arm of the spread-limbed tree. The old pavement below just meanders off into the weeds, disappearing into dandelions.

Along many stretches, the road once known as America's Main Street is free of busy traffic, and sometimes it is free of any traffic at all. So take a ride! Stop and look! Have an adventure! Take my tip! Make that trip! Get your kicks on Route 66!