FOREWORD: **AMERICA'S ROAD**

MICHAEL WALLIS

Route 66 is the most famous highway in America, and arguably the world. To this day, Route 66 still captures the attention and imagination of legions of travelers, a highway of dreams realized and dreams lost.

Unveiled in 1926, it was only a few years before the highway was on everyone's map. In no time it became "America's Main Street." During the turbulent 1930s, tens of thousands of tenant farmers, Okies, Arkies, and other desperate refugees from the Midwest and southern Plains took to the highway. Eager to rebuild their shattered lives, they followed the scent of orange blossoms to California, the so-called promised land.

During World War II, troops trained along the entire length of the highway and convoys motored east and west. Then, at the close of the war, Route 66 experienced what many consider its glory years. America's passionate love affair with the internal combustion engine increased and big gas-guzzling cars with fins became the rage, just as President Dwight Eisenhower changed everything with a single stroke of his pen. On June 29, 1956, he sent America speeding down an off-ramp toward the future of an automobile-oriented society. In signing the Federal-Aid Highway Act, which created the nation's interstate highway system, Eisenhower not only made Route 66 obsolete, he kick-started a nationwide freeway-construction boom.

The result of that single act literally rearranged the way people live their lives in America. One road expert pointed out that the amount of

concrete used to build the network could erect a wall nine feet thick and fifty feet high around the world. The interstate highway system that resulted was undoubtedly the most important and grandest public works project in United States history.

True enough, the interstate boom brought an economic boom, driving the growth of fast-food outlets, national motel chains, and other cookie-cutter businesses built around off-ramps.

The interstate network also brought urban sprawl. With the creation of the new highways, it became possible for people to live a significant distance from their workplaces. This new-found ease of travel lured residents and businesses from city centers, leading to the decline of many downtowns and creating communities that required driving to get to the supermarket, the park, school, church, and, of course, the shopping mall. Some politicians and big business interests called it “progress.”

In the long run, the Interstate Highway System, for all its supposed virtues, may well be seen as a mistake. At least, that is what a growing number of Route 66 proponents came to believe. They speculated on what the United States might have become had it invested earlier in improving the railroads or developing better ways of moving people. Yet even as the familiar Route 66 shield signs were removed and road maps changed, these people knew that Route 66 would never die. Their ranks soon swelled and continue to grow today. They are the protectors of pop culture, the commercial archaeologists, preservationists, and historians who joined forces with the folks who still eke out a living along the old highway. Together they ignited the intense revival of interest in Route 66 that still gains momentum. If Route 66 is to have any kind of future, the past must be acknowledged.

That is precisely why *A Route 66 Companion*, compiled by David King Dunaway, is so important. This collection of historic narratives, prose, poetry, essays, and personal memories provides readers with the most comprehensive view ever offered of the greater Route 66 story. Dunaway, however, does not present the romanticized viewpoint of the Mother Road—past and present—that often ignores reality. He goes much further, and in so doing validates the entire experience of open-road travel. For that reason alone I consider Dunaway’s anthology one of the most important contributions to the ongoing effort to preserve and protect Route 66.

For we have always been a restless people. Long before any white intruders came to the continent, Native Americans kept on the go. They moved from place to place to avoid inclement weather, follow the great herds of bison, or escape warring tribes. They carved a network of trails and traces later used by white explorers and settlers. Some of those same pathways eventually became the foundation of many of our existing paved highways, including Route 66.

By reading about the time before there was a highway, we can better understand our own history and learn from it. All we have to do is go back to a time long ago. Back to bedrock. To those who knew the land in its natural state. Go back and imagine—dare to imagine. Route 66 has always been a place where people are free to imagine. Imagine when there were no roads or highways. No cities, towns, farms, or factories. Imagine no boundaries or borders. Imagine a time when the prairies and stands of trees were the churches, temples, and cathedrals. Imagine no prisons, cemeteries, country clubs, casinos, or shopping malls. Imagine when there were no cars or trucks.

And then go back to when the first cars did appear. Go back to when Route 66 was a new road—parts of it unscarred, unproven, unknown, and unpaved. Back to bold days when crews of men and mules and machines carved new roadbed. When dreamers connected stretches of existing highways. When the road became a linear village. Back to when Cyrus Avery was the newly crowned Father of Route 66 and when Andrew Hartley Payne pulled on his racing singlet and prepared to run in the 1928 “Bunion Derby,” the Great Transcontinental Footrace.

Go back before the coming of the networks of interstate highways—those super slabs of monotony that now crisscross the land. Go back to the hot, sad days and agonizing nights of the Great Depression and the devastating Dust Bowl. Back to when an entire nation’s life was interrupted first by acts of God and then, a few years later, by acts of madmen, when the world went to war. Back to when people of color could not find the comfort afforded white travelers on the Mother Road.

Go back to when there were no strip centers or shopping malls. When there were no Golden Arches, Starbucks, or Walmart. Go back to when gasoline was dirt cheap and a ten-dollar bill—maybe even five bucks—got you through a Friday night date just fine. When there was no bottled water, no credit cards, no cappuccino, and no cholesterol.

Imagine a time when no one locked doors, when there was no air-

conditioning or television, and when everyone sat on the front porch. People actually looked each other in the eye, had conversations, wrote long and beautiful letters by hand, and mailed home postcards. No text messaging, cell phones, or Internet.

Hitchhiking was safe for both parties, and drive-in movies were not on the endangered species list. There were genuine waitresses and real carhops. Food tasted better. Summer lasted longer.

Go back and then imagine the old highway—this road I love—as it was, as it now is, and as it will become. This crooked path littered with history, aspirations, broken promises, and fulfilled dreams has been shaped by its geography.

Route 66 is big cities and tiny towns. It is rich farmland, Ozark forests, vast prairies and rangeland, high and low desert, great mountains, mighty streams. Flood, earthquake, fire, and killer tornadoes have tempered it and its people. Route 66 is the eight states it traverses and bits and pieces of forty-two more. It is American, through and through.

The highway has yielded plenty of saints and a good many sinners. It is not just black and white, but shades of gray and all the colors of the rainbow and then some.

The Route 66 story is both bitter and sweet. A microcosm of the nation, the old road has plenty of scar tissue, much to be ashamed of and much to brag about, as well as a bright future. It is an unfinished story—a work in progress. It always will be.