

THE MOTHER ROAD



U.S. Route 66, also known as US 66, Route 66, or the Will Rogers Highway and colloquially known as “the Main Street of America” or “the Mother Road,” was a highway within the U.S. Highway System. One of the original U.S. Highways, Route 66 was established on November 11, 1926, and road signs were erected the following year. The highway, which became one of the most famous roads in America, originally ran from Chicago, Illinois, through Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, before ending at Los Angeles, covering a total of 2,448 miles (3,940 km). It was recognized in popular culture by both a hit song and the *Route 66* television show in the 1960s.

Route 66 served as a major path for those who migrated west, especially during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, and it supported the economies of the communities through which the road passed. People doing business along the route became prosperous due to the growing popularity of the highway. Those same people later fought to keep the highway alive in the face of the growing threat of being bypassed by the new Interstate Highway System.

Route 66 underwent a great many improvements and realignments over its lifetime. It was officially removed from the United States Highway System on June 27, 1985, after it had been decided the route was no longer relevant and had been replaced by the Interstate Highway System. Portions of the road that passed through Illinois, Missouri, New Mexico, and Arizona have been designated a National Scenic Byway of the name “Historic Route 66,” which is returning to maps such as the official Illinois Highway Map and the online Google Maps. Several states have adopted significant bypassed sections of the former alignment of U.S. 66 into the state road network as State Route 66.

Over the years, U.S. Route 66 received many nicknames. Right after Route 66 was commissioned, it was known as “The Great Diagonal Way” because the Chicago-Oklahoma City stretch ran northeast to southwest. Later, Route 66 was advertised by the U.S. Highway 66 Association as “The Main Street of America.” The title had also been claimed by



Old **U.S. HIGHWAY 66** is still marked with signs. Travelers from around the world come to the U.S. each summer to travel the old route. Thinkstock



supporters of U.S. Route 40, but the Route 66 group was more successful.

In the John Steinbeck novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, the highway is called “The Mother Road,” its prevailing title today. Lastly, Route 66 was unofficially named *The Will Rogers Highway* by the U.S. Highway 66 Association in 1952, although a sign along the road with that name appeared in the John Ford film, *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was released in 1940, twelve years before the association gave the road that name. A plaque dedicating the highway to Will Rogers is still located in Santa Monica, California. There are more plaques like this; one can be found in Galena, Kansas. It was originally located on the Kansas-Missouri state line, but moved to the Howard Litch Memorial Park in 2001.

OLD ROUTE 66 in OKLAHOMA CITY. This triangular building at 23rd and Classen Boulevard was originally built to house the Townley Dairy Store. It now advertises Oklahoma-based Braum’s Ice Cream and Dairy Stores.