



MAYOR OF THE MOTHER ROAD

The world's most famous highway can no longer be driven in its entirety. But 80 years after John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* first immortalised Route 66 as symptomatic of the American dream, MELISSA LAWFORD heads to Arizona to meet the man devoted to bringing the legend back to life



Photography: Amy Harrity



Angel Delgadillo is 91 and has spent his entire life on Route 66. He was born in Seligman, a small town in Arizona that long made its living from the road. From the age of 12, he travelled along it, playing with his siblings in the family band, the Delgadillo Orchestra. In 1947, he attended American Barber College in nearby Pasadena. And today, as he carefully shaves a trucker with a folding razor, the worn tarmac is visible through the bumper stickers plastered across his window in a building just a block from where he grew up.

This month, it is 80 years since John Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning story of the Joad family's Depression-era migration along Route 66 from their Oklahoma farm to California. Delgadillo grew up in a family of nine children during the 1930s and his first memories of the road were of playing in the weeds behind their house. "Here comes a car, now we have lights!" he remembers. The cars were filled with families like the Joads – 400,000 displaced people who travelled west in the wake of the Dust Bowl. "As children, we thought it was funny – 'Here comes a poor Okie, he only has one mattress on the top of his car!'" says Delgadillo. He whistles slowly through his teeth and shakes his head. "Now I understand how tough it was for America then."

The Grapes of Wrath named 66 "the mother road". The phrase now appears on number plates, T-shirts and signs along the entirety of its stretch from Chicago to LA. But today, as Route 66 historian Jim Hinckley points out: "The most amazing thing about Route 66 is that it doesn't exist."

That's because, in 1956, the Interstate System began to bypass Route 66 towns. The road was fully decommissioned in 1985. Today, the only driveable stretches are those that merge with the Interstates or are designated as historical routes. The road lives on primarily in its mythology. "Route 66 is not our oldest or our most scenic highway," says Hinckley. "But it has always had the best press."

From its inception, it was marketing incarnate. Its path began as a Native American trade route that in 1857 was marked as a wagon trail. In the Powerhouse Visitor Centre in Kingman, a little west of Seligman, there are photographs of local businessmen using picks to build this preliminary road themselves – to make sure that the traffic would run past their shops. When the 2,448-mile Route 66 opened in 1926, the road's mastermind, Cyrus Avery, chose the number simply because "it had a nice ring to it," says Josh Noble, who runs the Powerhouse. The opening was heralded with the Bunion Derby in 1928 – an 84-day foot race from



"ROUTE 66 IS NOT OUR OLDEST OR OUR MOST SCENIC HIGHWAY, BUT IT HAS ALWAYS HAD THE BEST PRESS"

LA to Chicago, and then New York. Crowds flocked and the accompanying press marathon featured daily reports from America's first mobile radio station. (The race was won by a 20-year-old whose surname, fittingly, was Payne.)

Route 66 was where motels – 'motor hotels' – were born for the travelling American public who were going on holiday. Restaurants proliferated, described by Steinbeck as having "walls decorated with posters, bathing girls, blondes with big breasts and slender hips... holding a bottle of Coca-Cola and smiling". In 1946, Nat King Cole first performed Bobby Troupe's (*Get Your Kicks On*) *Route 66*. Businessmen have created endless reasons for people to stop and spend. An entrepreneur at the now deserted Two Guns trading post in Winslow, Arizona, built a makeshift zoo of mountain lions. Further down the road, the landowners at the 50,000-year-old Meteor Crater in the desert stopped grumbling about trespassers and opened a visitor's centre. A giant blue concrete whale appeared in a roadside pond in Oklahoma in the 1970s. In 2015, the Uranus Fudge Factory opened on 66 in Missouri (tagline: 'Everything you need is in Uranus!'). In Holbrook, Arizona, a peeling sign asks, 'Have You Slept in a Wigwam Lately?'

The road "has always been about dreams", says Hinckley. "Now the dreams are international, and sometimes they border on flat crazy." He reminisces about a French mime artist who attempted the length of the road on six-foot stilts: "He made it to Oklahoma before the heat got to him."

But despite capturing people's imaginations worldwide, Route 66's history isn't straightforward. Discrimination on the road was rife and many motels and attractions were closed to black travellers. As shown in the recent Mahershala Ali film, a motorists' guide called the *Green Book* was created so African-Americans could travel the USA with dignity in a time of racism. The historian Candacy Taylor has retraced the more progressive sites and has found that less than five per cent are still in operation – Motel DuBeau in Flagstaff is one. "It took courage and resolve to be listed as a *Green Book* property," says Taylor. "These business owners... were taking a stand against racial segregation."

Delgadillo's parents had emigrated from Mexico in 1917 and were aware of the difficulties many travellers faced. "Back then discrimination was bad – it still is in some places – so my father started cutting Mexican people's hair for them," says Delgadillo. He still has the invoice for the barber's chair his dad bought for \$184 in 1926 – and he still uses the chair: "I refuse to put new leather on it." The seat is cracked and the stuffing held in by layers of tape, the result of surviving several hundred thousand haircuts.

The mirror above Delgadillo's enamel sink is coated in business cards left by visitors. He is wearing a green transparent plastic visor, which he trades for a navy baseball cap decorated with Route 66 badges when he has finished the haircut. He has an expressive face and often punctuates his talk with a gentle, slow-whispered "Wow".

Like his late brother Juan, who ran the Snow Cap diner next door, Delgadillo has always made his living from Route 66 traffic. His world changed when the Interstate 40 bypassed Route 66 in Arizona in 1978. "On February 18th at about 2.30 in the afternoon," says Delgadillo, "Seligman died." Most people moved out. The Delgadillos struggled. There wasn't even a marking for their town on the Interstate. Then Delgadillo persuaded the Chamber of Commerce to put up signs. In the early 1980s, customers "began to trickle in". Bored of travelling on a fast, straight @

LIVING HISTORY

From left: Angel Delgadillo shaves a customer in his father's chair; Mr D's Route 66 Diner is a local success story; milkshakes at the Galaxy Diner in Flagstaff



Watch Henry Fonda in *The Grapes Of Wrath* and documentary *The Bikes of Wrath* on board (both on selected flights)





road that was a means to an end, everyone was trying to retrace the journeys of their childhood.

Delgadillo and his wife, Wilma, talked to the local business owners along the old Route 66. In 1987 at the Copper Cart restaurant by the Grand Canyon Caverns, 46 people met to found the Historic Route 66 Association of Arizona and began to petition the government. In November 1987, the stretch of road from Seligman to Kingman became a historic site.

Traffic picked up. Within a year, Delgadillo's brother, who had run the Snow Cap alone for a decade, hired three staff members. Business owners from the other bypassed Route 66 states began to call. Today, all eight have historic associations, but Arizona has the longest driveable stretch of historic road – the 136 miles from Ash Fork to Topock. "They decertified our Route 66 to the world," says Delgadillo, in a way that would sell well on the motivational speaker circuit. "And we the people brought it back."

Now, there is a glorious dealing in nostalgia. Route 66 is reborn today in kitsch. Outside The Delgadillo Gift Shop, we are accosted by a man with a vast moustache and a holstered pistol, holding the reins of two horses. One is called Elvis Presley: "Get on! You can say you rode Elvis on Route 66 – not even his wife Priscilla could say that!" As we drive west to the Hackberry General Store – a shrine to Americana plastered with dollars left by pilgrims – the road melts in the sun and we are overtaken by six Corvettes, which park in formation in the lot.

A little further west is Kingman, where Scott Dunton started working in his father's car dealership when he was seven and opened Mr D's Route 66 Diner in 1992. It is a similar homage, with menus designed to look like

records. Dunton wears a turquoise polo shirt and a gold ring with a hunk of Kingman turquoise, in neat coordination with the pink-and-teal colour scheme. In his dealership next door, a bright blue 1967 Riviera is being repainted. The Stars and Stripes wave in the sun.

"This road has become a living, breathing time capsule," says Hinckley. There are parallels to the mythologising of the Wild West. "If it doesn't have bullet holes in it it's not authentic," says David Andreasen, who runs the Old Trails Museum in Winslow – home to a 66 shield that is wholly perforated.

The section of 66 from Kingman to Oatman, an old gold-rush town, is treacherous. It hasn't changed since it was decommissioned after the local mining industry died in 1952. The dog's-leg turns snake through the agaves and crumbling red dust. A low-lying forest of homemade crosses – some strung with plastic silver beads that catch in the cholla cacti – extends for acres down the mountainside. It's where the Joad family "crawled the jagged ramparts ... and came down slowly in the late night, through the shattered stone debris of Oatman".

The town draws its travellers today with the gunfights that the few locals who remain stage in the streets, and its population of wild, white-bellied burros – donkeys that wander with the confidence of movie stars, nosing visitors outside Judy's Saloon & Pool Hall. Oatman now lives off the idea of what everyone wants it to be.

Willa Lucas opens the Glory Hole antique store by removing a large wooden post that stops the burros from eating her books. Half of her store is a makeshift museum of the town. "Are either of you perceptible to invisible residents?" she asks as we venture upstairs. Sightings of

Where to stay

LA POSADA Winslow

This former Harvey House, designed to look like a Spanish hacienda, was popular with movie stars escaping the paparazzi. Rooms from £99pn. laposada.org

DROVER'S INN Williams

Expect Wild West-style rooms, rifles and antlers on the walls and a veranda that Butch Cassidy might shoot from. Rooms from £100pn. wildwestjunction.com

HOTEL MONTE VISTA Flagstaff

A relaxed vibe with a glamorous past (Bogart was a guest), an iconic rooftop sign and live music. Its cocktail lounge was a speakeasy during Prohibition. Rooms from £54pn. hotelmontevista.com

a woman in a red dress are apparently not infrequent.

Elsewhere along 66, there is a sense of regeneration. In Kingman, Terry Thomson named his bar Ricketty Cricket "because everything downtown was falling apart". But since he opened his brewhouse and restaurant in 2017, with a bar strung with glowing fairy lights inside miniature Fireball Whisky bottles, his business has grown into three outlets with more than 75 staff.

In Flagstaff, a boho mountain town with a large student population and a ski and snowboard culture courtesy of the nearby peaks, the air smells of hops. In 2011, Michael Marquess took over a derelict building and built the Mother Road Brewing Company. Today it's a bustling bar and there are six other craft breweries in town. Marquess has fond memories of his grandfather, who "wouldn't measure road trips in miles but in beers" (working at a rate of one beer an hour). The historic motel signs still tower above the town. Behind the scenes at Northern Arizona University, archivist Sean Evans is working to create a museum from the Delgadillo records.

As for the man himself, Delgadillo is keen to get home: "In 60 years of marriage, I haven't missed one meal." His children now manage his gift shop, which is clearly a source of joy to him. He has "semi-retired" and cuts hair only on request. The fascination with Route 66 will endure, he says, because we live in a time when people can have dinner together sitting on their phones. "Here we acknowledge every human being who comes in," he says, greeting a family from Thailand with the energy of a teenager. "This is what has been lost."

[@melissalawford](https://twitter.com/melissalawford)
With thanks to visitarizona.com

PARK AND RIDE

Outside the Delgadillo gift shop you can hitch a ride on Elvis; neon sign of the Downtowner Motel in Flagstaff. Right: Wigwam Motel in Holbrook



FIND IT AT BA.COM
BA flies to Phoenix daily from London Heathrow. Flight time: ten hours, 30 minutes

