

Short Read 1

Remember to annotate as you read.

The Open Road 66

by Monica Halpern

1 The first automobiles appeared in the 1890s. Powered by an electric motor instead of horses, they were called “horseless carriages.” At that time, there were only 144 miles of paved roads in the nation. When people went for a drive, cars bounced along dirt tracks. Dust blew into their eyes, and mud splattered their clothes.

2 Not only were there few paved roads in those days, but there were no gas stations or road maps. The new motorcars broke down often. For this reason, people did not go far. The first cars were also extremely expensive. Few people could afford them, so there was little reason for the country to build interstate highways. For many, horse-drawn carriages or trains were still the best way to travel.

3 Then in 1908, Henry Ford introduced the Model T automobile. Unlike those before it, this car was affordable. Because it didn’t cost much, many people bought it. As more people owned cars, the need for paved roads, gas stations, and new maps increased. As a result, the Model T helped change transportation.

“People can have the Model T in any color they want — so long as it’s black.” —Henry Ford



4 People with cars wanted to go places. They wanted to hit the open road and explore America. However, to do so they needed better roads. So in 1916 Congress passed the Federal-Aid Road Act. It made funds available to help states build two-lane interstate highways. Workers would build the new roads, creating new jobs.

5 Route 66 was one of the first good roads. In the 1920s it linked small towns and big cities from Chicago to Los Angeles. It stretched about 3,850 kilometers (2,400 miles) across two-thirds of the country. Local merchants built gas stations, motels, and all-night diners beside the highway. Some built special attractions for tourists. People came to see the sights. Others drove west to California seeking a better life. By the 1930s, truckers began transporting goods cross-country on Route 66. Many of these travelers bought gas and food and stayed in the motels along the highway. Route 66 became the perfect open road.

6 Today not much is left of Route 66. Other highways are bigger and faster. But travelers can still find road signs that show where America’s oldest highway once stretched.



From roads to highways

1908: Model Ts are mass produced.

1916: Congress passes the Federal-Aid Road Act.

1926: Route 66 is commissioned.

1937: Route 66 is finished.

1956: Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 establishes national Interstate Highway System.

1982: Interstate Highway System is completed.