Getting Your Kicks on Route 66

BARBARA KLEIN: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Barbara Klein.

STEVE EMBER: And I'm Steve Ember. This week, we go for a ride through the colorful history of Route 66, a road that has been called "The Main Street of America."

(MUSIC: "Route 66"/Rosemary Clooney)

BARBARA KLEIN: The idea for Route 66 started in Oklahoma. Citizens there wanted to link their state with states to the east and west. By the nineteen twenties, federal officials wanted to connect state roads to provide a shorter, faster way across the country. So a plan was developed to connect existing state roads into one long national highway.

United States Highway 66 was established on November eleventh, nineteen twenty-six. It was one the first federal highways. It crossed eight states. It was three thousand eight hundred kilometers long.

Route 66 became the most famous road in America. It passed through the center of many cities and towns. It crossed deserts, mountains, valleys and rivers.

STEVE EMBER: In the nineteen thirties, people suffered through the Great Depression. In Oklahoma, many poor families lost their farms because of dust storms. So they traveled west to California on Route 66 in search of a better life.

In nineteen thirty-nine, John Steinbeck wrote about these families in "The Grapes of Wrath."

BARBARA KLEIN: In his book, Steinbeck wrote: "66 -- the long concrete path across the country, waving gently up and down on the map ... over the red lands and the gray lands, twisting up into the mountains, crossing the Divide and down into the bright and terrible desert, and across the desert to the mountains again, and into the rich California valleys."
Steinbeck wrote: "66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land ... 66 is the mother road, the road of flight."

STEVE EMBER: In nineteen forty-six, the songwriter Bobby Troup and his wife drove across the country to Los Angeles. He wrote a song about traveling on Route 66. The song told people they could have fun, could get their kicks, on that drive.

In Los Angeles, Bobby Troup took the song to Nat King Cole, who recorded it. It became a huge hit.

(MUSIC: "Route 66"/Nat King Cole)

BARBARA KLEIN: In the nineteen fifties, holiday travel brought more and more families out West to explore. Route 66 represented the spirit of movement and excitement.

In the nineteen sixties, Americans watched a popular television series called "Route 66." It was the story of two young men driving across the country. The show was filmed in cities and towns across America. Yet only a few shows were filmed on the real Route 66.

STEVE EMBER: In real life, people were getting fewer and fewer kicks on Route 66. By nineteen sixty-two, parts of the road were closed because they were in poor condition.

The federal government was building bigger highways. Cars and trucks could travel at higher speeds. People started driving on these new interstate highways instead of the old Route 66.

Finally, in nineteen eighty-five, Route 66 was officially removed from the national highway system.

People have formed groups to save parts of the old 66 and many of the interesting places to eat, stay and see along the way.

BARBARA KLEIN: Award-winning writer Michael Wallis is an expert on the historic highway. He is the author of "Route 66: The Mother Road."

Michael Wallis was born in Saint Louis, Missouri, right off the highway. He has lived in seven of the eight states along its path. His website, michaelwallis.com, has information and stories about the history of the Mother Road.

(MUSIC: "Route 66"/Chuck Berry)
STEVE EMBER: Now it is our turn to take a trip on Route 66. We will have to search for it at times. Many parts of the road have new names or numbers. Some parts of it are included in other interstate highways.


From Chicago, the road goes southwest through many small towns in Illinois. One of them is Springfield, the home of America’s sixteenth president, Abraham Lincoln.

Now we cross into Missouri. We drive through Saint Louis, the city known as "the Gateway to the West." More than three hundred thousand people live there.

There are many natural wonders to see in Missouri. One of the most famous along Route 66 is Meramec Caverns in Stanton.

BARBARA KLEIN: Inside the cave, visitors see beautifully colored stalagmites and stalactites. These are mineral formations. Stalagmites rise from the floor; stalactites hang from the ceiling.

Long ago, local Indian tribes used the Meramec Caverns for shelter. A French miner named Jacques Renault discovered saltpeter in the caverns in the seventeen hundreds. The material was used to produce gunpowder.

Later, the outlaw Jesse James is said to have used the caverns as a hiding place.

STEVE EMBER: From Missouri, our drive takes us for a very short time through the state of Kansas. Then we enter Oklahoma. Oklahoma may well be the heart and soul of Route 66. That is because there are more kilometers of the road in Oklahoma than in any other state.

In Claremore, Oklahoma, a statue honors a famous American, Will Rogers. Will Rogers was born in Claremore. He became a popular actor, radio broadcaster and newspaper writer in the nineteen twenties and thirties.

We pass through many historic towns in Oklahoma. In Oklahoma City, we can visit the National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center.

And in Clinton, we can stop at the Route 66 Museum. This official museum tells the complete history of the road and its importance to America.

(MUSIC: "Route 66"/Depeche Mode)
BARBARA KLEIN: Now we drive through the northern part of Texas. The area is called the Texas Panhandle. We stop near the city of Amarillo to look at some unusual art that celebrates Route 66. Welcome to Cadillac Ranch.

A Cadillac is a large, costly automobile. Cadillac Ranch has ten of them half buried in the ground. A wealthy farmer and art collector named Stanley Marsh created Cadillac Ranch to honor America’s roads.

Continuing west, we travel through the states of New Mexico and Arizona. We pass through some of the most beautiful country in the Southwest.

Petrified Forest National Park is one of the natural wonders of Arizona. Trees that are millions of years old have turned to stone in unusual shapes.

North of Route 66 is a desert known for its red and yellow sand and rocks. Its name is the Painted Desert.

(MUSIC: "Route 66"/John Mayer)

STEVE EMBER: We continue on our trip, driving on a winding road up and down the Black Mountains. We arrive at Oatman, Arizona. Long ago, Oatman was a rich gold-mining town. Everyone left the town when the mining ended. Today Oatman still looks like it did in the past.

Now we enter California. We pass through the Mojave Desert, some mountains and several interesting towns. The old highway gets lost among the modern road systems of Los Angeles.

Finally, we arrive at the Pacific Ocean in the city of Santa Monica. Our trip ends. We watch the tide come in, and thank Route 66 for the ride.

(MUSIC: "Route 66"/Buckwheat Zydeco)

BARBARA KLEIN: Our program was written by Jerilyn Watson and Shelley Gollust. Caty Weaver was our producer. I'm Barbara Klein.

STEVE EMBER: And I'm Steve Ember. You can listen to this show and read a transcript at voaspecialenglish.com. You can also get the names of all the artists you just heard singing versions of "Route 66." And we hope you can join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.