

Route 66, a secular pilgrimage: The scallop and the shield

*“Now it is time for you to tell...of our viage and all the remnant of our pilgrimage.”*

—*Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterbury Tales (1392)*

Today, a pilgrimage is intimately tied to tourism and consumerism. Still, the original idea persists: to seek, to search, to dream, to redeem, to explore a track or create one inside oneself.

Route 66 is arguably the world’s most famous road. Though nowhere so old as many other pilgrimage sites, including the *Camino*, the road is approaching its centenary and is certainly the most famous transit across the United States—though it only covers part of the transcontinental journey, from Chicago to Los Angeles. 66 makes a fine example of how relatively new technologies in human history—the train, the automobile, the motor courts that turned into motels—have evolved to serve the need of the pilgrim. Route 66 is an object of international tourism; indeed, a significant fraction of those who drive what John Steinbeck called “The Mother Road,” come from foreign lands, much as those performing Hajj in Mecca travel from all around the world. Like that trip to Mecca, it is something which people have promised themselves they will do, a part of a bucket list, a part of a journey to the soul of America in both its urban and rural incarnations. Though the pilgrimage to and along Route 66 occurs in a non-religious context—though there are religious tracks which cite 66 as a road to heaven—it shares the blending or confusion of pilgrimage and tourism. As a documentary on the *Camino* put it, in the stranger on the earth, “Today we have tourists on the road of the pilgrimage. Yes, it is a pilgrimage tourism, which has commodified Route 66 into a set of predictable experiences which creates an ever-growing distance between those who live on ‘America’s Road aflight’ (John Steinbeck) and those who voyage there. Whereas in olden days, the search was for penance and redemption, today the Route 66 pilgrimage echoes a single word: ‘freedom.’” As Professor Ruth Olzendiel told me, “The reason

Europeans and others are so obsessed with Route 66 is it offers the prospect of a journey of thousands of miles, with no checkpoints, no borders, open land like we can't find anywhere else. Having watched American Westerns and seen these vast plains, we want to go and experience this for ourselves."

The number of rituals surrounding Route 66 are considerable. There was a couple who waltzed across Texas on its strip of Route 66; there are a number of individuals who walk all or a part of Route 66 who when they turn 66, want to make the Route 66 journey. One brought a dog and dog cart with them for their things. And among those who visit Route 66 regularly, there is a badge of honor in (at least one time), in completing the entire journey of some 2440 miles. Some take this journey in steps, others try and make the driving journey in under 2 weeks. Each of these modes of travel have changed since Route 66 began in 1926: Now Model T Fords have given way to powerful motorcycles; the jalopies and broken-down trucks of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* have given way to modern conveyances and campers with all the conveniences of a modern living room on wheels. And there is, literally, a badge to be received for traveling Route 66; in fact, a variety of them. Various states offer a booklet—similarly to those of travelers down the *Camino*—which is stamped at various locations within that state. The ultimate goal of the 66 roadie is to wear either a cap or a jacket with the sewn-on badges representing Route 66 in each of its eight states.

Along the Route, there are places each pilgrim/traveler/tourist must stop: the Blue Whale of Catoosa, Oklahoma; the Blue Hole of Santa Rosa, New Mexico; the beginning of the road in Grants Park, Chicago; and the end of the road, near the famous Santa Monica Pier near Los Angeles. There are lists of must-see places which run into the hundreds, as curated by Route 66's designation as a World Heritage Site. Don't forget "Winona, Arizona" comes from perhaps the most famous song about a road in US history, "Get Your Kicks on Route 66." And 50 years later, the Route 66 TV series—the only American television series about a road!—is still in reruns, as Buz and Tod ramble across the US doing good and seeking the heart of this complicated country. But there are two dozen videos on Route 66; hundreds of

songs in dozens of albums which take up Route 66; and some 300 books written on this road according to last count.

The element of the supernatural persists on Route 66, which has no less than three books about ghosts and paranormal behavior. All of this suggests not only a popular but a spiritual angle to this destination. Though few works about this road are overtly religious, here is a quote from Reverend David Jeremiah: “There is another ‘Route 66,’ however, that began more than 3000 years ago and was completed no less than 1900 years ago. For nearly two millennia, it has been an artery through which people have found life-changing experiences. And unlike the asphalt Route 66, ‘God’s Route 66’—the Bible—never needs updating, never loses its relevance—if you travel via God’s Route 66 faithfully every day, you’ll never lose your way. The 66 books of the Bible are what make up God’s ‘highway to Heaven.’”

Any pilgrimage, religious or secular, creates relics. In Route 66’s case, this has been commodified into a series of objects for sale. In giftshops along the road, one can find anything from Route 66 thimbles to ashtrays to suede jackets with the Route 66 shield imprinted to even more useful objects such as a Route 66 thermometer/barometer or the ubiquitous Route 66 baseball caps. Then there are the actual relics, the nails and railroad ties from Route 66’s predecessor, 15 railroads which Route 66 supplanted; the vintage gas pumps, collected from stations along the road; the dozens of museums on Route 66’s vast stretch, offering kitchenette diners or authentic matchbooks displayed in a glass case.

Some of the relics are actually food: the “cozy dog” in Springfield, Missouri (don’t call it a corndog!); the “horseshoe,” a strange concoction in the shape of a large U eaten along Route 66 in Springfield, Illinois; the breakfast burrito in New Mexico; the smoked meats at the Barbecue King in Los Angeles.

Of course there are many who are left out of Route 66; they just happen to live on this famous route, which is their farm-to-market road, the street you take to the gym; the way downtown. And while Route 66 is known as a fabulous trip, there are many who never got to board. The Hispanics who gave up their *ranchitos* so that the road could be built across Texas; the African American homesteaders, such as the Threatt family of Luther, Oklahoma, who gave up their land so that the road could be built but today can't find a place to be buried in Oklahoma's segregated cemeteries. Like all pilgrimages, the 66 road has changed and evolved. Where once African Americans could not be found after sundown in Edmond or Welleston, Oklahoma, now travelers of all races can safely voyage. And just as the villages along the *Camino* depend upon tourists buying food and seeking lodging, the Route 66 hajjis pass through some of the most remote areas in the United States—such as the Mojave, the Great American Desert at the same time as they pass cities which would make Léon look like a tiny village: Chicago, St. Louis, Los Angeles. And finally, Route 66 is in the midst of a transformation, where action is being taken and reflections given to preserve the historic road. In the last two years, Route 66: The Road Ahead Partnership opened up a way for all stakeholders on 66 to combine their various interest: economic development, historic preservation, research and education. (Full disclosure: The presenter is a member of its Board of Directors.) For sacred routes need tending. They unwind over vast distances and as times passes, a toll is taken in its sacred sites and secular stops. Today, like the *Camino*, Route 66 does not belong to the country that hosts it. Some are surprised to know there are Route 66 societies in Brazil, Germany, the Netherlands, Japan, Switzerland, and the Czech Republic to name just a few. For members of these secular societies, the journey to and along Route 66 is the transformational experience of a lifetime, giving them both bragging rights for the journey and a deeper insight into a country which continues to puzzle the world.