

# What's Happening

IN CALIFORNIA ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

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## Route 66 Reaches the Pier

U.S. Highway 66 is America's most famous highway. It opened in 1926. Its 2,448 miles connected Chicago and Los Angeles, and it was a major part of Americans' move westward. At a ceremony on November 11 a new "End of the Trail" sign went up at the Santa Monica Pier.

The highway passes through eight states. It goes through large cities as well as open country. From Chicago it heads southwest through Illinois, Missouri and Oklahoma. There it straightens out to go directly west through the panhandle of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California.

Since 1985 Route 66 has not been a national highway. Large interstate highways have replaced it. Now parts of the highway have different route numbers. The route still has several nicknames. One, the "Mother Road," came from the great writer John Steinbeck in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. Another is "Main Street of America."

Route 66 is filled with history. It was the first highway in the new federal highway system, and it gave Americans a connection to the open road. It led people to new lives out West after the Depression. Many took it to new jobs and homes during and after World War II too. It also provided a living for people who opened cafes, gas stations and motels along the route.

The end of Route 66 in Los Angeles

has changed a few times. First it ended downtown, and later it continued out to Santa Monica. There it ended at a busy, unpleasant intersection. At some point the unofficial end became the corner of Ocean Avenue and Santa Monica Boulevard.

That probably happened when a movie studio put a sign there for filming.

In its day the highway was popular. In 1946 Nat King Cole recorded the song "(Get Your Kicks On) Route 66." Many others recorded it too, including the Rolling Stones. A TV show called "Route 66" ran weekly for four years in the 1960s. Today the route is still a favorite with tourists who want to relive the old days.

November 11 was the route's 83rd anniversary. A thousand people attended the ceremony. Sixty-six classic cars drove to the pier. Two beauty queens rode in a convertible at the front of the parade, just like in the old days. The Route 66 Preservation Foundation calls the pier the "spiritual" end, since travelers have gone as far west as they can go.

People who drive Route 66 now have a good place to start or end their journey. The sign at the pier is a pleasant spot for pictures. There they can socialize with other travelers and buy souvenirs, just as they do when they travel on America's "Mother Road."

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## BIOGRAPHY

### JIM CONKLE

#### FOUNDER, ROUTE 66 PRESERVATION FOUNDATION

Jim Conkle was nine years old when his family moved from Indiana to California. They packed their 1938 Dodge and drove west on Route 66.

That was his first contact with the famous highway. Now, many years later, he is the head of the Route 66 Preservation Foundation.

Jim's family moved around a lot. He spent his teens mostly in Guam and Washington State. Unfortunately he started getting into a lot of trouble. Rather than finish high school, he joined the Marine Corps at age 16. In the next seven years he learned some self-discipline. He even earned his GED.

After the Marine Corps Jim wanted to work in law enforcement. He did not qualify for it though. Instead he worked in warehouses and drove trucks. He also sold tools all over California. Then he worked for a Japanese company and traveled around the world. When injuries from a car accident forced Mr. Conkle to retire, Route 66 entered his life.

In 1999 the U.S. Congress was considering a law to preserve Route 66. That was when Jim Conkle founded the California Route 66 Preservation Foundation. That foundation still exists. However, he decided that he could do more to preserve all of Route 66 if it dropped "California" from its name.

The foundation does things to raise

money and to educate. It collects information about the route's history. That includes the road, towns, businesses and people. Mr. Conkle has

taken photos, helped with books and accompanied film crews along the route. The foundation also identifies places that need repair.

Mr. Conkle has spent a lot of time on Route 66. He has made the round trip more than a hundred times. Another hundred times he has covered at least 1,000 miles along the route. He has traveled by bicycle, motorcycle, car, truck and motor home. He has hitchhiked along the way too.

Several spots on the route

stand out for Jim Conkle. In Texas he likes the Midpoint Cafe, which is exactly halfway between Chicago and Santa Monica. He especially likes the Ariston Cafe in Litchfield, Illinois. That cafe has stood there for 86 years, longer than Route 66 itself. Truthfully, though, he likes everything on Route 66 because it all belongs to American history.

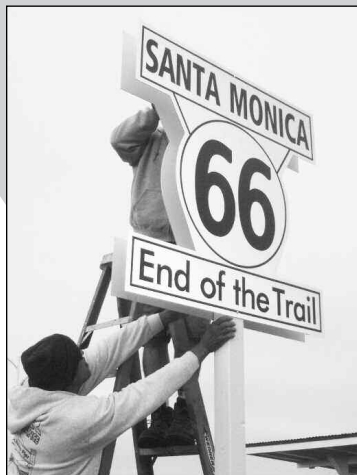
When the "End of the Trail" sign went up, Jim Conkle was there. He arrived at 4 a.m. to set up the ceremony. During the day he did 32 interviews with TV, radio and newspaper reporters. Even if the pier is not officially where the route ended, he is glad. It is a fine spot where travelers can meet, share their experiences, and keep the route's history alive.



*"The road belongs to everybody."*

# Background Information

This year was the 83rd anniversary of the road's opening. More than 85 percent of the original Route 66 is still drivable.



The original end of Route 66 was at Seventh Street in Los Angeles. Then it moved to the intersection of Olympic and Lincoln Boulevards in Santa Monica.

Route 66 was a major path of the migrants who went west during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. It was not

completely paved until 1938, which made it the first highway to be completely paved.

In 1985 the U.S. government officially decommissioned Route 66 as a national highway.

Parts of the road in Illinois, Missouri, New Mexico, and Arizona have been designated National Scenic Byways with the name "Historic Route 66."

The route is also called "Will Rogers Highway," named after the great American humorist. Upon his death in 1935 the U.S. 66 Highway Association changed its name to the Will Rogers Highway Association, and began calling Route 66 the Will Rogers Highway. Plaques that dedicate the highway to him stand near Texola, OK, Galena, KS, and at Olympic and Lincoln in Santa Monica.

Route 66 was home to the first drive-through restaurant in the U.S. It was Red's Giant Hamburg in Springfield, Missouri. The sign was supposed to say "Hamburger," but the owner had mismeasured and the sign was too short. The first McDonald's was also on Route 66 in San Bernardino.

In 2006 the Disney/Pixar film "Cars" featured Route 66.

The World Heritage Fund has listed Route 66 as one of the 100 most endangered resources in the world. The California Route 66 Preservation Foundation made a list of twelve sites along the route that are in significant danger of being altered, destroyed or forgotten.

## Topics for Discussion and Writing

### Pre-reading:

- Use the Internet to find old Route 66, and trace its path from Chicago to Los Angeles.

### Comprehension:

- Describe the role that Route 66 has played in American life.

### Beyond the Text:

- Identify an old highway near where you live, and describe how it has changed over the years.
- How do you think chain motels and restaurants have changed the feeling of Route 66?
- What kinds of Route 66 souvenirs do you think people will be able to buy at the Santa Monica Pier?

## Vocabulary

*Article-specific:* pier; panhandle; interstate; nickname; the Depression; convertible

*High-use:* novel; federal; intersection; anniversary; classic; preservation; foundation; to socialize

## Sources

*International Herald Tribune* November 13, 2009

*New York Times* November 12, 2009

*Los Angeles Times* September 13, 2009

National Park Service

[www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/route66](http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/route66)

Route 66 Preservation Foundation [www.cart66pf.org](http://www.cart66pf.org)

## CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

### English - Language Arts

*Reading* 1.0 Vocabulary Development

2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

*Writing* 1.0 Writing Strategies

2.0 Writing Applications

### ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development / Comprehension

Writing Strategies and Applications

Listening and Speaking

### History-Science

4.4; 11.5; 11.8