

Description and Historic Context for Pre-1937 Highway Alignments

(Excerpt from “Route 66 Through New Mexico: Re-Survey Report” by Dr. David Kammer, March 2003. Prepared for the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division through grant funds from the Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program of the National Park Service.)

Description

During the early years of the federal highway system, the realignment of highways was commonplace as engineers sought to create safer and more efficient roadways. Many re-alignments tended to be minor; a few involved a major re-routing of a highway. Such was the case with Route 66 as it passed through New Mexico. Approximately 507 miles long in 1926, the alignment of Route 66 in the state was reduced to 399 miles by 1937. The longest sections of the initial alignment created a large S curve as the road stretched across the middle of the state. West of Santa Rosa it turned north, crossing nearly 20 miles of empty rolling plains before crossing the Pecos River near the 19th century Hispanic communities around Anton Chico (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: 1940s Road Map Showing Both Alignments of US 66

Route 66 continued north an additional 25 miles passing through a series of small ranching settlements before intersecting with U.S. 85 at Romeroville just south of Las Vegas. Aligning with U.S. 85, Route 66 followed the corridor of the old Santa Fe Trail and its successor, the Santa Fe Railroad, and passed through the villages of Tecolote, Bernal, San Jose, Rowe and Pecos. Skirting the tourist facilities at Pigeon’s Ranch, the highway climbed Glorieta Pass and descended the narrow defile at Cañoncito, where it diverged from the railroad alignment to veer toward Santa Fe.

Route 66 entered the state capital along College Street (now Old Santa Fe Trail), then turned west on Water Street at the rear of the La Fonda Hotel. It exited downtown

Santa Fe along Galisteo Street and turned south upon connecting with Cerrillos Street. Climbing the gentle north slope of La Bajada Mesa, the highway descended the mesa's sharp south escarpment along a series of hairpin turns before arriving at the village of La Bajada (see Figure 4). Once again aligning with the railroad just north of Domingo Station, Route 66 roughly paralleled the tracks to the east as it meandered through the alluvial fans of the Sandia Mountains before arriving at Bernalillo. There it closely paralleled the railroad, and entered Albuquerque along Fourth Street. From this point the highway crossed the Rio Grande three times; first at the Barelvas Bridge, then at Isleta Pueblo, and ultimately at Los Lunas. Heading west, Route 66 paralleled the railroad as it climbed the western escarpment of the Rio Grande Valley and curved northwest toward Correo and Laguna Pueblo. There it resumed its westward course more or less along the 35th Parallel, crossing the Continental Divide and then paralleling the railroad as it descended the valley of the Puerco River (Rio Puerco of the West) toward Gallup and the Arizona border.



Figure 4: Car Descending 1920s Alignment of Route 66 at La Bajada

While the corridor along which this Route 66 alignment passed for 11 years is readily traceable along Interstate 25 and federal and state highways, few sections of the historic roadway remain, especially in rural areas. Given the Bureau of Public Road's (BPR) policy of "staged construction," in which various sections of roads within the federal highway system were gradually upgraded rather than a single highway being completed end to end, some of the pre-1937 sections of Route 66 were never improved beyond receiving an initial gravel surface. The road from west of Santa Rosa to Romeroville as well as much of the road west to Santa Fe, for example, was never a hard surfaced road during its tenure as Route 66. Nor was the road at La Bajada ever a hard surface road until it was realigned three miles to the east in 1932, where it approximated the current alignment of Interstate 25. Although Route 66 south of Albuquerque to Los Lunas was paved by 1926, it was realigned along the west bank of the Rio Grande five years later to remove the two additional crossings of the river below the Barelvas Bridge. Thus, while a review of Plan and Profile records for most of these road sections suggests that it is possible to trace many of the approximate pre-1937

alignments of Route 66, most of the current roads do not represent the historic dirt and gravel highway. The most intact sections with the highest degree of alignment integrity are the those that pass through the village of Pecos, which was never hard-surfaced during its tenure as Route 66, the roadway at the La Bajada escarpment, and the section extending from near Algodones south across the Sandia Reservation to North Fourth Street. Short road sections, some now on private lands, may also offer examples of the historic roadway.

In contrast, urban road sections traversed by Route 66, such as College, Water and Galisteo streets in Santa Fe and Fourth Street and Isleta Boulevard in Albuquerque, were paved during their period of service to the highway. Over the more than six decades since Route 66 was realigned to other roadways, these streets have remained largely unaltered, their current surfaces and curbing indicative of standard improvements characteristic of all urban streets. While their commercial roadsides have undergone substantial development, some of the buildings lining these streets and associated with automobile tourism prior to 1937 remain. In Santa Fe, the building histories included on the HBI forms completed as a part of the city's downtown building inventory indicate that all of the remaining buildings associated with automobile tourism have undergone substantial alterations. In Albuquerque, three early tourist courts, two gas stations and a café remain. The gas stations and café are listed as contributing resources within the Barelás-South Fourth Street Historic District. Additionally, the "Mushroom Kiosk" on Isleta Boulevard is listed in the State Register of Cultural Properties.



Figure 5: Otero's 66 Service, Los Lunas

Much of the historic character of Route 66 as it passed south of Albuquerque through the agricultural area around Isleta Pueblo and Los Lunas has been lost as the non-reservation area has urbanized and commercial strips have developed along NM 47 (the former Route 66 alignment from Isleta south to Los Lunas.) Three largely unaltered properties associated with Route 66 remain in Los Lunas. Two of these are listed in the State Register and the third has been inventoried and noted as eligible for NRHP listing (see Figure 5). The recent expansion of Los Lunas to the west of Interstate 25 has

obliterated any evidence of the earlier roadway. Previously noted portions of Route 66 persist west of the Puerco River (Rio Puerco of the West), however, they appear as small broken road sections generally lying south of the current alignment of NM 6 along the north right-of-way of the railroad.

Significance

From its inception in 1926, the federal highway system underwent frequent changes as engineers sought to improve the safety and efficiency of roadways within the national system. At first simply a splicing together of local roads that connected lines of settlement, many of the road alignments included in the original 1926 system were a reflection of already existing patterns of movement within an area. Over time, however, the roads within the federal system came to reflect the quest of engineers to move increasing amounts of traffic efficiently and directly across the country. Perhaps the best example within New Mexico of how the newly created federal highway system adhered to these earlier patterns of settlement appears in the enormous S-curve that comprised the original alignment of Route 66 as it crossed the middle of the state. Stretching 107 miles more than its 1937 successor, this early alignment recalls the period during which the nascent federal highway system evolved from a string of connected local roads to truly national highways.

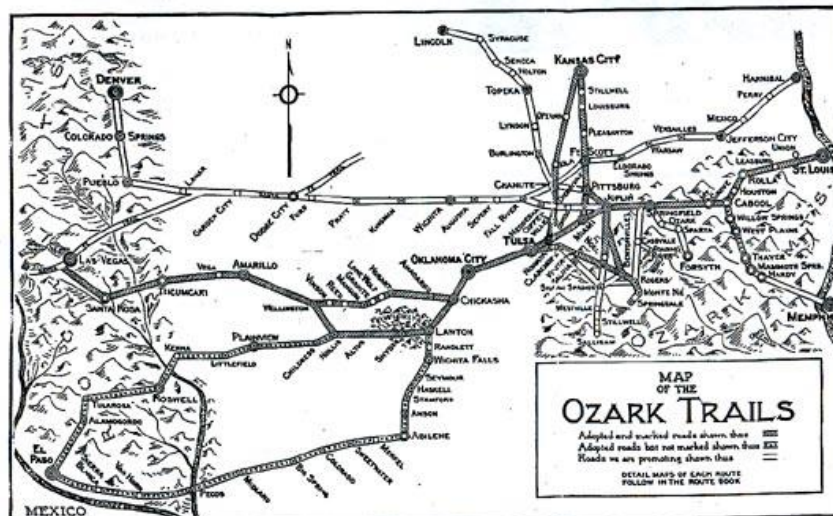


Figure 6: Map of the Ozark Trails "Named" Highway

All of the original alignments of Route 66 conformed to established patterns of movement across the land. A high percentage of these miles illustrate how early roads adhered to the railroads' right-of-way in order to reduce construction obstacles and to connect the small population centers that had grown up at shipping points, water tanks and side tracks along the rails. This was true of all of Route 66 through Quay County and eastern Guadalupe County as well as through San Miguel and Santa Fe counties from Romeroville to east of Santa Fe. It was also true of the highway through Sandoval, Bernalillo, Valencia and McKinley Counties all the way to the Arizona border. In fact, the only section of the original alignment of Route 66 that lacked a parallel railroad was

the section extending northwest from Santa Rosa to Romeroville. In this instance, the alignment followed an already established spoke of one of the wagon roads that extended from the mercantile hub at Las Vegas to communities along the Pecos River, such as Anton Chico, Santa Rosa and Puerto de Luna.

Many of the roadways that served the 1926 alignment of Route 66 had been previously designated as parts of the several private highway associations that preceded the creation of the federal system (Kammer 1992: 36-41). Precursors to the pre-1937 alignments of Route 66 in New Mexico were the Texas-New Mexico Mountain Highway, an arm of the multi-branched Ozark Trail extending from the Texas border at Glenrio to Santa Rosa and then northwest to Las Vegas (see Figure 6). Similarly, the National Old Trails Highway, which was an alignment included in the Ocean-to-Ocean Highway, followed the Santa Fe Trail into the northwest corner of the state at Raton, extended to Santa Fe, then stretched south to Los Lunas and west to Gallup. Longtime advocates of a federal highway system, the boosters of these earlier highway associations quickly shifted to boosting the new federal system in 1926 with its numerically designated roads marked by black and white shields. Many members of these earlier road associations became supporters of the new organizations and promoted the federal roads that replaced those they had initially championed. Members of the Ozark Trails Association, for instance, quickly joined the new Route 66 Association and are credited with coining the slogan, “the main street of America” to promote the new federal highway stretching from Chicago to Los Angeles.

During its early years, the pre-1937 alignment of Route 66 offered highway sections to motorists that represented some of the best and worst of the New Mexican roads within the federal system. The *Automobile Blue Book*, a Chicago-based highway guidebook, described the section between Santa Rosa and Romeroville as “gravel, sandy dirt and stone, some of which is poor,” but acknowledged that pavement extended north from Isleta to Algodones and, by 1928, on through to Santa Fe. Similarly, it described the road from Los Lunas to Gallup as “gravel and dirt” (Kammer 1992:45). While very little of New Mexico’s highway mileage was paved in the 1920s, the discrepancies apparent along Route 66 reflect the various priorities the state highway department was able to assign to roads within the FAP system under the BPR’s policy of “stage construction.” This policy permitted each state to determine where it would place its priorities in using the federal monies it received to complete its share of the roads that were included within the federal road system.

Since priorities were often given to more heavily used roads, lesser-used roads, such as that which ran from Santa Rosa to Romeroville, tended to receive less funding for improvements. Annual traffic counts conducted by the highway department extending over the 11-year period of the pre-1937 alignment show that Route 66 never carried the number of vehicles that traveled on U.S. 85. As a result, the section from Santa Rosa to Romeroville and the section west from Los Lunas to Laguna received relatively few improvements. In contrast, the section from east of Santa Fe to Los Lunas, which carried traffic through the state’s capital and the Rio Grande Valley, received many of the early paving projects let by the highway department.

Despite widespread acceptance that New Mexico's primary orientation continued to be north-south along the corridor that the Camino Real, the Chihuahua Trail, the early Santa Fe Railroad, and NM 1 had followed, by the late 1920s many leaders had begun to advocate the future importance of east-west travel. This advocacy was particularly strong in cities such as Albuquerque and Gallup, which saw their future growth tied to the potential for east-west automobile travel. The first step toward realizing this goal occurred in 1926 when outgoing Governor Arthur T. Hannet, the former mayor of Gallup, ordered highway department crews to cut an earthen trace due west from Santa Rosa to the Estancia Valley.

Although the state lacked the funds to improve roads that were not eligible for federal funding, some motorists began using the trace west from Santa Rosa, especially during good weather. Termed "the Santa Rosa cut-off" the new road siphoned traffic away from the Route 66 alignment, further reducing the number of cars using the highway and, as a result, weakening the priority that had emphasized improvements to the road north from Santa Rosa to Romeroville. A similar development occurred west of Albuquerque, when the city's boosters, led by ex-officio mayor Clyde Tingley, advocated the creation of an improved road running directly west from the city. With the completion of a bridge across the Rio Grande just west of Old Town in 1931 and the funding of a through truss bridge across the Rio Puerco (completed in 1933), this new route, termed "the Laguna cut-off," also served to reduce traffic along the Route 66 alignment from Los Lunas to the Laguna Reservation.

As a result of these increasingly aggressive lobbying efforts to realign Route 66 directly west across New Mexico, by the early 1930s even engineers for the BPR were studying the possibility of realigning Route 66. Normally loath to approve federal funding for new roadways if they were seen as duplicating previously funded projects, they saw the value of a more direct route across the state. Despite protestations from supporters of the original route, especially boosters in Santa Fe, by 1932 the BPR had accepted the request of the State Highway Commission to realign Route 66 at some point in the future. The completion of the new bridge across the Rio Puerco in 1933 opened the way for realignment, and when the last sections of hard surfacing were completed in 1937, the original alignment was replaced by the shorter east-west alignment. This realignment was accompanied by several other shorter realignments, especially in the western part of the state, as several railroad grade crossings were eliminated by realigning Route 66 south of the Santa Fe line from Grants to Mentmore west of Gallup.

The inventory of these pre-1937 alignments and their associated roadside properties offers a sense of the comparative rate of development that occurred along Route 66 during the road's first and second decades. The pioneering era of private automobile travel, which extended into the Great Depression, was marked by a concentration of motorist services in the population centers along the road. While records denoting roadside services during that era are few, most indicate the garages, hotels, cafes and other services located in larger towns with isolated rural services, such those at Pigeon's Ranch or Domingo, being the exception. In contrast, by the 1940s several gas

stations, cafes, and even tourist courts had begun to appear along rural sections of the realigned highway, giving rise to the perception of Route 66 as a linear community sustaining both travelers and local residents who drew their livelihood from the road. As a result, those few remaining properties identified with the pre-1937 alignment of Route 66 tend to appear in populated areas such as Bernalillo and Los Lunas as well as in Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

In conclusion, the primary significance of the pre-1937 alignment of Route 66 in New Mexico lies in how it reflects the early federal highway system's use of already existing patterns of movement across the land. Historically, New Mexico's primary orientation had been north and south with patterns determined by routes that followed the Rio Grande and Pecos Valleys, and that relied upon infrequent mountain passes for latitudinal movement. Even during the first decades of statehood when the highway department idealized the development of a road system that would link every county seat with the capital at Santa Fe, the north-south axis remained predominant. Thus even with the creation of the federal highway system in 1926 and its general adherence to a network of federal roads approximating a grid across the nation, the east-west highway designated to cross the central part of the state continued to reflect this earlier orientation.

Description and Historic Context for Post-1960 Resources

Description

Just as the designation of the federal highway system in 1926 had little immediate effect on the quality of roads within the new system, the designation of the Interstate Highway system in 1956 brought little immediate change to the roadways motorists traveled as they crossed the country. Similar to the manner in which the highways of the earlier system gradually moved to completion through the process of staged construction, the interstate highway system also moved to completion through staged construction. Thus, in New Mexico, where Interstate 40 replaced Route 66, the process by which the new, limited-access highway was ultimately completed required some 25 years. With the exception of Albuquerque, through which the interstate system was completed by 1962, the interstate was generally completed first through rural areas. The final stages skirting or bisecting the smaller cities were completed last, in part a reflection of the opposition raised by people operating businesses along Route 66 in those communities. As a result, Route 66 continued to serve as a part of the national network of roadways through the 1960s, 1970s, and even the early 1980s in New Mexico. Only when the final section of Interstate 40 was completed at Williams, Arizona in 1984, did the highway become redundant and undergo de-certification in 1985.

Since the Bureau of Public Roads had begun to anticipate the construction of a large, limited-access highway system as early as the late 1930s, initial steps to accommodate the increasing traffic along the nation's highways began to appear in the years following World War II. In New Mexico, all of the urban sections of Route 66 were widened with curb improvements during the late 1940s and early 1950s. These widened roadways, including Tukumcari Boulevard in Tukumcari, Will Rogers Drive in Santa Rosa, Santa Fe Drive in Grants, and Railroad Avenue in Gallup, characterized the urban sections of Route 66 during its last years.

The survey of Route 66 resources conducted in 1991-92 included roadside properties constructed through the mid-1960s. It did not, however, include properties constructed along the highway from the late 1960s and through 1981 when the last sections of the interstate were completed through New Mexico at Tukumcari and Gallup. This re-survey included approximately 30 properties located in Tukumcari, Santa Rosa, Grants and Gallup that were constructed during that period. The vast majority of these properties consist of motels, service stations and restaurants. In most instances their design, scale and materials reflect the advent of the franchise businesses that now surround many of the exits along the interstate highway system. Ramada Inn, Travel Lodge, and Denny's Restaurant franchises, for example, began to appear in many of these smaller cities, even as it was apparent that the traditional commercial strip would undergo a substantial reorientation as the last sections of Interstate 40 bypassed their traditional commercial strips.

Significance

The urban sections of Route 66 passing through Tukumcari, Santa Rosa, Grants Milan, and Gallup represent the last sections of roadway that continued to function as Route 66 in New Mexico. Completed under staged construction policies similar to the earlier development of Route 66, Interstate 40 moved to completion in New Mexico first with long rural sections of limited-access highway and finally with sections skirting or bisecting these smaller cities. In part, the new highway's location close to these cities represented a partial victory for the cities' merchants who had opposed earlier plans to align the interstate highway farther away from these small population centers.

The current roadways are generally four lanes with a slight median and represent the improvements made along urban sections of Route 66 during the late 1940s and early 1950s. These efforts to facilitate the flow of traffic to and from urban areas anticipated the passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, which created the interstate highway system. Well maintained and periodically upgraded but largely unaltered, these urban roadways are significant as reminders of how Route 66 underwent minor changes during its last decades in anticipation of the larger road system that ultimately replaced it.

The survey of the properties located along these urban sections and constructed after 1965 indicates that while they may be technically viewed as Route 66 resources, none meet the eligibility requirements established in the original multiple property nomination. Despite this lack of eligibility, many of these resources are popularly associated with Route 66 and, in fact, have signs identifying them with "Historic Route 66" displayed in lobbies and windows. Thus, while not candidates for NRHP listing, the Route 66 Preservation Program may nevertheless choose to work with local planners and tourism promoters to identify these properties as components contributing to each community's identification with Route 66.