

FIRST WORD

BY MICHAEL WALLIS

The Mother Road

ROUTE 66. JUST THE NAME IS MAGIC. It's the road of legend, inspiration to a nation of dreamers. It's a soldier thumbing home for Christmas, an Okie family on the road to the promised land during the Depression. Neon, Burma Shave signs, fry cooks, hustlers, and motel clerks. A time before America became generic and travel meant romance. Its glory days were over long ago and some go in search of it today as if it were a holy relic. In some places, the old highway may only be a service road or paved fragments of original alignments that run off into the weeds. But the very act of finding it is part of the adventure.

THE HIGHWAY SOME THOUGHT WAS DEAD AND GONE is alive and well and kicking like never before. Route 66 survives, a grizzled veteran with the allure and prestige of an aging celebrity. It has become part of popular culture, something no other highway can claim. **THERE IS A DEEP, SOME SAY EVEN SUBCONSCIOUS,** reason for its abiding fame. Running from Lake Michigan across two thirds of the continent to the Pacific shore, it has become synonymous with the open American road, one of the most famous highways in the world. Some time ago, Route 66 reached icon status and not just because of the physical roadbed or all the historical and cultural treasures that litter its shoulders from Chicago to Santa Monica. It is much more than commercial archeology and a wealth of attractions both natural and fabricated. It is important to remember that Route 66 is people. That is what the road has always been about and why it remains active and relevant to this day. **AS A SON OF**

ROUTE 66—I grew up in Missouri and traveled the road as a child—I got tired of hearing the road referred to in the past tense. I knew that although the familiar shield insignias had vanished and the new interstate highways now bypassed entire towns, the people of the Mother Road remained. They have stayed, through good times and bad, and they motivate all those concerned with the highway's preservation. It was these people and their stories that inspired me to write *Route 66: The Mother Road*. It is, in large part, the human aspect of Route 66 that has moved writers, poets, musicians, photographers, and artists. The road is rich with the stories of those who have lived, worked, and traveled along its length. They can be found in Bloomington, Edwardsville, Rolla, Joplin, Riverton, Vinita, Clinton, Shamrock, Vega, Tucumcari, Gallup, Winslow, Needles, Barstow, and all the other towns and cities and wide spots in the road. They run convenience stores and souvenir shops. They have refurbished abandoned homes and forgotten buildings, turning them into tearooms, bed and breakfasts, or antique shops. They are still serving up old fashioned, meat and potato meals with homemade rolls and pies.

They leave tried-and-true careers to bring an historic theater or curio shop or Mom-and-Pop motel back to life. A growing number of them add a proud flourish: a retro Route 66 shield, which you can find in front of everything from auto salvage yards and photocopy centers to video rental stores and tanning salons. **HERITAGE TOURISM HAS BROUGHT LIFE BACK** to the Route 66 landscape: small business operators are anxious to meet and serve travelers at Fedderson's Pizza Garage, Boots Motel, Eisler Brothers Store, and Jack Rabbit Trading Post. A preservation initiative has fostered this market in the hopes that it will both revitalize the small communities and encourage them to save their historic character. These business owners are usually people who are also drawn by the highway's legend. Each time you venture out onto Route 66 you come across another dreamer or muse or a keeper of the magic. They help us realize that although we live in an age of superhighways, it is good to have the road when we find time is on our side and can savor its pleasures. Its curves and desolate stretches and sudden sur-

HERITAGE TOURISM HAS BROUGHT LIFE BACK TO THE ROUTE 66 LANDSCAPE: SMALL BUSINESS OPERATORS ARE ANXIOUS TO MEET AND SERVE TRAVELERS AT FEDDERSON'S PIZZA GARAGE, BOOTS MOTEL, EISLER BROTHERS STORE, AND JACK RABBIT TRADING POST.

prises stir our hearts and remind us of why we prefer this, the trail of Steinbeck, Guthrie, and Kerouac, to the impersonal detached super-slabs of 21st century America. **THE INTERSTATE SYSTEM OF THE 1950S** signaled the end, but even as the maps were changed and the "Route 66" shields were auctioned off, new protectors of the road were gaining strength. Today, they are widespread and organized. They realize that Route 66 is reborn every time someone reads *The Grapes of Wrath*, catches a rerun of a '60s television series, or listens to the music of the road. It lives both in memory and myth. In many places, the signs are returning; its proud name has been retained. There are still motor courts, curio shops, and tourist attractions operating on the edges of the old highway. There are still cafes where the cook in the kitchen baked the pie. From Illinois to California, a Route 66 revival has been growing. It still has the same magic. It will always mean going somewhere. It has been a sweet ride for 83 years, but I believe the best is yet to come.

Michael Wallis is cofounder of the Route 66 Alliance. Adapted from his book *Route 66: The Mother Road*.