



The

Highway

Story



Christmas '21

The Highway Story

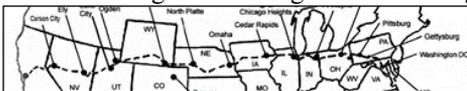
Every life and every story have a beginning and an ending. The story of the United States began on July 4, 1776, with the signing of a Declaration of Independence by thirteen British colonies in North America. Our Christmas Story for 2021 begins on Monday, July 7, 1919. Unlike the signing of the Declaration of Independence, which marked our country's beginning, few remember this event. There are no holidays or parades in its honor, but it marked the start of a very important military convoy. On this day, the U.S. Army's Motor Transport Corps Transcontinental Convoy (that's a mouthful) began a trip across the country, beginning in Washington D.C. and ending at the Presidio in San Francisco.



This unusual Convoy stretched three miles from beginning to end. It was a unique experiment involving military trucks and transports, support vehicles, motor cars and motorcycles traveling across the United States on the nation's primary east-west road, the Lincoln Highway. The purpose of the road trip was to gather data for a new concept in motorized transport for the military. The need for such a convoy came from lessons learned in the "war to end all wars," World War I. To deliver troops, supplies and ammunition to battle lines, railroads and efficient motorized transports were essential to the war effort. Unfortunately, in the European theatre, rain often turned the rough, dirt roads into impassable quagmires, even for horses and mules trying to move military equipment and supply wagons.

The cross-country Convoy offered a real-time opportunity for the military to gain insight on the state of American roads and our transportation infrastructure. Not unlike Europe, in 1919, only twelve percent of our nation's roads had been "surfaced," a definition that included mostly ill-maintained dirt and gravel surfaces. To make matters worse, with no organized authority overseeing highways or highway construction, the roads that existed were generally unconnected or broken, ending up in various dead ends.

Since the military was the primary focus of the trip, a West Point graduate and Lieutenant Colonel, Dwight Eisenhower, was assigned to the Convoy. Eisenhower had risen through the ranks quickly during WWI and understood the challenges facing an army in war. His service in the military convoy gave him a ground level view of the challenges in moving - or not moving - a bogged down army across our country.



Along the 3,250-mile route, the Convoy engineers repaired over eighty damaged wooden bridges to allow passage. Practically all roads from Illinois to Nevada were unpaved, and there were 230 instances of vehicles getting stuck due to road failure. When the two-month journey was completed, Eisenhower dedicated much of his report on the Convoy to a detailed summary of the poor road conditions in each of the states that the Convoy traveled. He observed that even some of the good roads were too narrow, and some formerly excellent roads had been allowed to deteriorate without maintenance. In short, America was in for trouble if war came to our shores.

Given Eisenhower’s critical assessment of the condition of America’s main east-west transportation artery, the rise of the trucking industry in America, and the fact that the Lincoln Highway ran from Times Square in New York to San Francisco through the weather-challenged northern United States (think snow and ice), America and Congress were ripe for a new solution to our transportation challenges. Thanks to Lt. Colonel Eisenhower, a comprehensive highway bill was finally passed in 1925, paving the way (pun intended) for a U.S. Highway System.

Enter U.S. Route 66, one of the original highways in the new U.S. Highway System. Officially established on November 11, 1926, Route 66 offered rural America and the trucking industry a new beginning. Unlike the Lincoln Highway, the 2,448 miles of Route 66 did not follow a traditionally linear east-west course. Its diagonal course linked hundreds of predominantly rural communities from the California coast through Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri and Illinois on its way to Chicago. For the first time, farmers could efficiently transport grain and produce for redistribution. The trucking industry was a huge supporter because the route between Chicago and the Pacific coast followed mostly flat prairie lands and enjoyed a far more temperate climate than northern highways.



In his famous novel on the depression, *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck proclaimed U. S. Highway 66 the “Mother Road.” Steinbeck’s classic 1939 novel served to immortalize Route 66 to Americans, especially to the estimated 210,000 people who migrated to California to escape the despair of the Dust Bowl along the Route. Certainly, in the minds of those who endured that particularly painful experience, and in the view of generations of children with whom they shared their story, Route 66 symbolized the “road to opportunity” and a new beginning of their lives.



Many of our generation don’t realize that Route 66 led to the creation of the modern travel system, spawning motor courts (the precursor to our Holiday Inns and modern hotels) and gas stations that not only sold gas but also other supplies like our mega truck stops today. There were few restaurants on Route 66, so cafes and restaurants sprang up to serve coffee and food to the weary travelers. And the travelers did come, fresh from World War II and glad to be raising families (our baby boomer generation), they poured onto Route 66 heading east and west during the 50’s and 60’s. Hamburger and ice cream shops and an extraordinary number of tourist spots (maybe traps?) opened from Chicago to the Santa Monica Pier to feed the appetites of the traveling public. Route 66 was booming and so famous that it had its own TV show starring Martin Milner, George Maharis and a red 1962 Chevrolet Corvette convertible. Route 66 took care of Americans in one of the most exciting and prosperous times in our history.

Since my lovely wife of 46 years has claustrophobia and refuses to fly, we take a lot of road trips. Several years ago, as Donna and I were returning from a trip through



Michigan and Wisconsin, we happened to see exit signs directing us to Scenic Route 66 in Illinois. Having just finished a book series called *The Broken Road* about a man who walked Route 66 from Chicago to California, we thought, “What the heck. Let’s take a look.”



That one fateful choice began a three-year odyssey of driving the entire 2,448 miles of Route 66 from its beginning in Chicago to its end in Santa Monica, CA. And when I say we “drove Route 66,” I don’t mean Interstate 40 which parallels the Route across much of the western plains. We sought out the original two-lane Route, sometimes ending at washed-out bridges and backtracking, and sometimes driving on rough dirt roads for what seemed like an eternity. We stayed in Route 66 hotels and ate at the Route’s famous Roadkill Cafe and countless

Route 66 Burger joints, a Route 66 donut shop in St. Louis and Delgadillo’s Snow Cap Drive-in Eatery and Roadside Attraction on Route 66 in Seligman, AZ. We even drove on a stretch of Route 66 outside of Albuquerque that played



America the Beautiful as we drove over it at exactly 45 miles per hour in Tijeras, New Mexico. We saw a whale in St. Louis, hot and cold water towers in St. Clair, Missouri, and even a leaning water tower in Britton Texas just east of Amarillo, (which by the way, is the home of the Big Texan Steak Ranch, famous for the “Free 72oz Steak Challenge” since 1960) and just west of Amarillo lies the world famous Cadillac Ranch.



In my opinion, you don’t just drive Route 66, you experience it. We never tried to drive continuously from one end to the other, even though we met people along the way who did just that. For example, while stopped at the Continental Divide near Gallup, NM, we met the Cragins, a delightful couple from Rutland, Vermont who had started in Chicago on a four-week trip over Route 66. We swapped stories and committed to connect when winter came to order some genuine Vermont maple syrup which they proudly produced. We experienced Route 66 together and parted company as they took off to California following a guidebook to the end of the Route, and we continued to wander.



On one of our trips when we covered the Route’s beginnings up north, we visited our daughter and son-in-law in Chicago along with our six grandchildren. In true Route 66 style, we left through downtown Chicago in search of Route 66’s beginning. Unfortunately, our visit coincided with serious riots in the city, and after lots of chats with, and warnings from, the police (who were out in force), we found Mile 0 of Route 66 amid a somewhat sobering experience of boarded up stores on Michigan Avenue.



When I was growing up, our family would take trips to visit family. Unfortunately, my dad was single minded about getting “there,” and we

would only stop for food and gas. Not surprisingly, we had to time our bodily functions accordingly. Donna and I decided early in our marriage (on our honeymoon, actually) to break that cycle. As we drove Route 66, we took time to see the sites and visit friends and family along the way.



We took multiple trips along Route 66 to California to see Jeremiah and Michael graduate from The Master’s Seminary in LA. We enjoyed spending time with Michael and his wife, Beth, and our five grandchildren in Santa Clarita. Now they are preparing to leave America for the mission field in January 2022, to go to Cali, Colombia. Jeremiah has also left California to become a pastor at a church in Gilbert, AZ. That too, became a side trip of one of our western tours.

Our traveling Route 66 was like going back in time and allowed us to see the world through different eyes. In fact, our eyes had peered into a world that was now 96 years old. A world that had gone through a life-changing depression, a Dust Bowl migration of nearly a quarter of a million Americans, a second World War and a Cold War with the Soviet Union. It also covered a time when Americans grew in numbers (the baby boomers) and experienced extraordinary prosperity and technological advances. We traveled through time and witnessed how the Mother Road reflected these major changes in American life and culture.



While Route 66 clearly told a great story of beginnings, as we traveled the road, the certainty of endings became more and more apparent. The motor court motel industry, complete with multi-colored neon signs which lighted the way for travelers across the country, is mostly in ruins today. Likewise, most of the clever and colorful gas stations that fueled the cars traveling the Mother Road are gone, with new roads bypassing the Route leaving the stations vacant, graffitied and crumbling.

It’s ironic that Dwight D. Eisenhower, one of the major supporters of Route 66, a decorated general in World War II and ultimately the president of the United States, was involved in both the beginning and end of Route 66. While the first World War revealed the military’s need for a paved road system in America, the second World War impressed General Eisenhower with the four lane German autobahns which allowed much faster, safer and more direct travel. By the late 60’s, the children of the Americans traveling Route 66 and the Mother Road were tired of two-lane roads that crawled slowly across the country, going through every town along the way.



We wanted something different, and once again, Dwight D. Eisenhower, in his second term as President answered the call and promoted the establishment of the Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, our modern interstate highway system. The decline of Route 66 across America happened quickly. By 1970, nearly all segments of original Route 66 had been bypassed by a modern four-lane highway. As we traveled Route 66, we missed not only unique gas

stations and colorful motels which had died, we found that whole towns had been bypassed and gradually died.

This past summer, as we wound down our travel on Route 66, several thoughts struck me about Route 66 and life in general. First, I'm sure you agree that life is a series of beginnings and endings. Route 66's birth certificate would have had been stamped 1926, and its death certificate would have been marked 1985, gone at the age of 59. Second, change is universal – everything changes at one time or another. Route 66 helped change America, and over time, the Route itself changed because of America.



Finally, it dawned on me that despite the good and bad changes that occurred over the years, the real magic of Route 66 was experienced along the highway between Chicago and Santa Monica Pier, not necessarily at the beginning or end of the road. Thousands of families saw America firsthand in these small towns, neon-outlined motor courts, gas stations and Route 66 burger joints. Both parents and kids were entertained by just looking out of car windows at the endless Burma Shave signs, building murals and Paul Bunyan-like giants providing eye candy (and yes, maybe even a few tourist traps) to the travelers. The beginning and endings of the trip were just the bonus destination.

You and I are a lot like Route 66. Every one of us had a distinct beginning at birth. Mine was on February 2, 1953, a great day for groundhogs, while Donna's was on December 19, 1954, an equally great day if it weren't so close to Christmas. Our growing family had its beginning on May 31, 1975, and continues with new beginnings, even after 46 years. Our oldest boy, Chad, and his wife, Melissa, had their sixth child, a daughter named Brynlee, this year raising our grandchild count to 26.



Like Route 66, life changes. While Ashley and Kyle and their six children are still in Chicago, Kyle has joined DD&F as a full-time creative genius. Rachel, our youngest, continues to serve as a missionary in France, and both Chad and Zach continue to run companies in central Arkansas. Josh works with me in Little Rock, and his wife, Lauren, and their five children live nearby. While my life and family have been an amazing adventure, I can't say I like all the changes that have occurred over the years. For example, God and I disagreed about Him calling Michael's family to move to Colombia, but then again, we also disagreed when He called Rachel to France. Although as a dad I hate having them so far away, I couldn't be prouder of all my children and their desire to serve the Lord and their commitment to stay on their own personal God-tailored Route 66 – whether near or far.

Like the travelers on Route 66, between the beginnings and endings, we are writing ever-changing stories with our lives. While we have no control over the beginning and very little control over the ending, our lives and legacy are created by how we travel the road between our beginning and our ending. If you are reading this story

today, then the good news is that both of us are between the beginning and ending, still on the road and still able to control how we live the days that are ahead of us, whether few or many.

Not everyone is as fortunate as we are though. In July of this year, the wife of a good friend of mine was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer. For a lifetime nonsmoker and physically fit person, this was quite a shock. Although the doctors made a valiant attempt to stop the disease, nothing worked, and my friend’s family chose to stop the chemo and immunotherapy. On October 17, 2021, only 103 days after her medical diagnosis was made, she left her husband of 33 years and her 23-year-old daughter at the much-too-young age of 53.



Honestly, even though I have lost both of my parents, friends and children of my friends, this loss affected me deeply. Perhaps it was an up-close-and-personal reminder of the uncertainty of life, or perhaps I just felt the anguish of my friend having to face such a loss and put myself in his place. While my friend’s personal faith through the difficult time encouraged me greatly, I couldn’t help but wonder how would I have responded? Would I have been mad at God for such an unexpected dead-end on the road of life or would my faith have carried me like my friend’s sustained him? I don’t know, and truthfully, I pray that I won’t have to. The personal challenge I face is that since life can come to an abrupt and unexpected stop, how will it affect the way I live now?



I enjoy reading, and recently finished a book Donna gave me, *The Stranger in the Lifeboat*. Not to steal the plot from your reading pleasure, the story of the lifeboat centered around two survivors of a boating disaster. When all seemed lost, the main character, let’s call him “Benji,” was ready to quit fighting to stay alive until the other person remaining in the boat, the stranger, turned out to be God. Benji had been deeply wounded by the loss of his wife to cancer and was incredibly bitter at the remaining person in the boat, God. The following is a slightly modified version of the exchange between Benji and God:



“Why did my wife have to die?” Benji asked.

God nodded as if this were expected. When someone passes, people always ask, “Why did God take them?” A better question would be “Why did God give them to us? What did we do to deserve their love, their joy, the sweet moments we shared? Didn’t you have such moments with your wife?”

“Every day,” Benji rasped.

“Those moments are a gift...Beginnings and endings are earthly ideas...Feeling loss is part of why you are on Earth. Through it, you appreciate the brief gift of human existence, and you learn to cherish the world I created for you.”

For me, the timing of the book was perfect. The quote reminds me not to blame God when bad things happen but to be grateful for allowing me to experience the good things that happen and granting me a much clearer perspective on the bad times. The quote reminds me of how unbelievably fortunate I am.

During the 59 years of Route 66's service, it was responsible for changing our country in many ways. Young or old, every one of us impacts others with our lives, some for good and some for not so good. Money and success fade like the attractions along Route 66, but our impact on those around us will last. This Christmas, I hope you will join me in looking back over the roads you have been traveling, and if you are off course, purpose to get back on the Route 66 that God has tailored for you and your family. That's the road that will lead to you to personal contentment and lasting peace - and by the way, don't delay making the change. Casting Crowns has a great song on this subject called "Scars in Heaven." The first verse begins:

*If I had only known the last time would be the last time
I would've put off all the things I had to do
I would've stayed a little longer, held on a little tighter
Now what I'd give for one more day with you*

None of us know when our last day will be, so be very careful with each day you are given. Like my friend's wife, your time may be very short.

Christmas is a unique time of year. It celebrates the birth of Jesus, the Christ child in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago. Jesus was far more than just a baby born in a manger to a carpenter and his wife-to-be: He was God in human form, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end Who goes on forever. No matter what road you have been on up to now, our sincere wish is for you to find the true road to peace, Jesus. Trusting in anything else is just wasting your time because unlike Route 66, God's Road for you will never dead-end or wear out.

***Randy Dennis, President
DD&F Consulting Group***