



Can't get their kicks on Route 66



BY JUSTIN JUOZAPAVICIUS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

MIAMI, OKLA. — The Riviera Courts motel is crumbling away and nobody seems to care.

Once a stop along Route 66, the 2,400-mile neon carnival that connected hundreds of communities from Chicago to Los Angeles, this late-1930s Mission Revival is just a weather-worn building on the side of a country road in far northeast Oklahoma.

Next door, soybean farmers Richard and Rosemary Woolard watch the place deteriorate from their front porch.

“Been a lot of changes in this old county,” 77-year-old Richard Woolard says.

The Riviera Courts is among hundreds of mom-and-pop motels that met their demise along the ribbon of Route 66 as America’s interstate system siphoned traffic off the Mother Road onto a four-lane, divided highway called progress.

In Oklahoma, with more Route 66 miles than any of the other seven states it flows through, many motels are derelict or abandoned, used as junkyards, makeshift car lots and flophouses.

Owners who inherited these historical footnotes have no use for them, and would rather sell the properties to developers if the price is right.

Today, many structures that made the road what it was -- the diners, family-owned service stations, barbecue joints -- have fallen apart.



Riviera Courts Motel

The nonprofit National Historic Route 66 Federation in Lake Arrowhead, Calif., estimates that at least 3,000 motels along the route are in various states of repair or disrepair.

Route 66, immortalized in John Steinbeck's 1939 novel "The Grapes of Wrath" and crooner Nat King Cole's catchy tune, debuted in 1926. The road meant steady work for scores of unemployed men who built it in the 1930s; an avenue for thousands who migrated west to escape the Dust Bowl; and a post-World War II playground for millions of Americans looking to roam.

With the interstate came the Holiday Inns, chain gas stations and drive-thrus. Neon and quirky were outs; pre-fab and fast were in.

The business model for the motels became outdated too. How was a place built in the 1920s for 11 to 20 patrons going to compete with a motel that could cram in 10 times more guests?

By 1984, the interstate had bypassed the last bit of 66 in Arizona, ending America's romance with the iconic highway.

The handful of motels that survived fight a stigma.

"Motels are such a part of our recent history that it's often hard for people to view them as historically significant," says Kaisa Barthuli, with the Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program in Santa Fe, N.M.

To drum up support for these forgotten properties, preservationists in Oklahoma recently added Route 66 motels to a list of most endangered historic places.

"People say, 'It's a nice sign, but I would never stay there,'" says Jim Gabbert, an architectural historian with the Oklahoma Historical Society. "There are dozens of old motels ... fighting the perception that these are rat traps."



Chelsea Motel

Traveling west from the Riviera Courts, the Chelsea Motel about 45 miles down the road seems in worse shape.

A couple of beat-up cars are parked on the grass in front of the wood-frame structure. Dandelions and shards of glass carpet the courtyard. In Room 6, there is noise from a TV or radio and a couple bottles of shampoo on the window sill, but nobody answers the door.

John Hall pops out from behind the building. He is 62, tall, gray-haired and shirtless, and could pass for a tattooed department store Santa Claus.

He and his wife own the motel and use most of its rooms as storage. They'd like to sell the place to build an Indian tobacco shop.

The motel was built around 1935 to cater to the traffic moving west. By the 1970s, it was headed downhill.

Holding onto a piece of history isn't in the Halls' blood, even though it's in their backyard. Restoring it would cost tens of thousands of dollars.

"I hope we sell the whole place and move into the country," he says.

There is some magic left in this town.



Elm's Motel

A couple blocks from the Halls' place, Frank and Trudy Jugler opened the Chelsea Motor Inn, a six-room, Route 66 tribute motel.

They have plans to put up tepees where guests can camp out, and they are restoring an adjoining 1890s house as a bed and breakfast.

In keeping with the traveling circus atmosphere so vital to luring tourists along Route 66 in the old days, the Juglers own a pet bison that roams in the backyard. It's named, aptly, Chelsea.

"We thought, man, it would be cool to be sitting on a chair in front of a motel on Route 66," says Frank Jugler, a fast-talking, 48-year-old Maryland native.



Like the Juglers, some folks are slowly reclaiming the few miles of Route 66 history that run through their city limits.

In Flagstaff, Ariz., residents are taking advantage of a facade improvement program that helps Route 66 building owners restore their neon signs. In Albuquerque, N.M., the city bought the historic De Anza Motor Lodge several years ago and recently selected a developer to restore the landmark as an upscale Route 66 destination.

A few places are getting by on America's Main Street.

Elm's Motel in Claremore, 30 miles west of Chelsea, is a series of modest yellow and brown cottages, with ivy creeping along the sides. Garages used to be attached to each cottage, but proprietors figured it would be more profitable to squeeze in another room.

“There’s not that many old places left in Claremore,” laments owner Tommy Copp, 68, who bought the place about 30 years ago. “They’re pretty much gone by the wayside. That’s called progress.”



Cotton Boll Motel

The story becomes sadder with each mile marker.

Canute, a dusty town of 500 or so about 105 miles west of Oklahoma City, hides a Route 66 landmark in the Cotton Boll Motel. With its classic red, white and green neon sign shaped like a tuft of cotton, the Boll is one of the most photographed along the route.

Its owner, Pat Webb, checked into the 16-room building in the mid-1990s and never left.

The 55-year-old oilfield pipe inspector turned part of it into his private home and playground for his grandchildren. But he has no plans to reopen the place to the public. Liability insurance alone would eat up profits, he figures.

“I just leave the sign up so people can take pictures,” he says with a shrug.

Forty miles further west, and another unhappy ending.

When 62-year-old retiree Klaus Battenfeld bought the Westwinds Motel 12 years ago, he didn't think fixing it up would turn into such a hassle. But the adobe-style structure in Erick, Okla., a town of 1,000 near the Texas border, proved too much work.

It needs a new roof, electricity, air conditioning.

He is selling the overgrown property where tumbleweeds blow across the courtyard like in some Wild West movie. Then, back to Germany.

"It's written in the big book, maybe, it's not designed for me to stay here for the rest of my life," Battenfeld says in his thick German accent.

Retirement is on hold. There was a detour on Route 66.



Westwinds Motel