US Route 66: The Mother Road

In 1926, the section of the transcontinental National Old Trails Highway that passed through downtown Winslow on Second Street became part of US Route 66, which ran from Chicago to Los Angeles. The highway was designed to link small towns to bigger cities and enhance their economies in the process. Affordable automobiles meant that travel was no longer just for the wealthy, and tourists stayed at the new motor courts and campgrounds. They joined local residents by patronizing the new service stations, diners, curio shops, and roadside attractions. The “main street of America” romanticized in songs, movies, and on television spurred even more auto-tourism business once gasoline and rubber rationing ended after World War II. Several thousand cars a day drove through downtown Winslow during the 1950s boom years.

The Winslow Airport

Winslow’s airport played a pioneering role in commercial air travel. In 1929, aviator and Transcontinental Air Transport (TAT) technical chairman Charles A. Lindbergh chose Winslow as one of twelve critical refueling stops for the nation’s first coast-to-coast passenger service. He chose the location for the terrain, weather patterns, and access to the Santa Fe line. Passengers taking the 48-hour, New York-to-Los Angeles trip would fly during the day and ride the train at night. Lindbergh’s TAT colleagues chose the flat, open landscape south of town for a terminal, hangar, parking apron, and three long asphalt runways.

TAT flew a fleet of Ford Tri-Motor planes that held ten passengers and had small kitchens for in-flight meals. In 1930, TAT and Western Air Express merged as Transcontinental & Western Air (TWA). Right: Joseph Kasulaitis (with Vida Norman) worked at the airport from 1929 to 1948. He met famous aviators including Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart, and Pancho Barnes, as well as many Hollywood stars. Kasulaitis reflected on those days:

“. . . passengers would walk on a carpet to the plane, all dressed up in their best, because flying then was the most glamorous, adventrousome way to travel . . . movie actors were in and out of here constantly . . . I remember meeting the Barrymore brothers, Jimmy Stewart, Mary Pickford, John Wayne, Gary Cooper, and Clark Gable and his wife, Carole Lombard.” Bob Thomas article for Arizona Highways, September 2000

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, the US military converted Winslow’s airport into a refueling and repair stop, and over 350 military flights passed through Winslow daily. TWA resumed commercial flights after World War II and became Trans World Airways in 1950, though service to Winslow Municipal Airport ended in 1953. Frontier Airlines provided regional flights from 1950 to 1974, when it discontinued service to Winslow due to high costs and lack of passengers.

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