Old Trails Museum
WINSLOW HISTORICAL SOCIETY

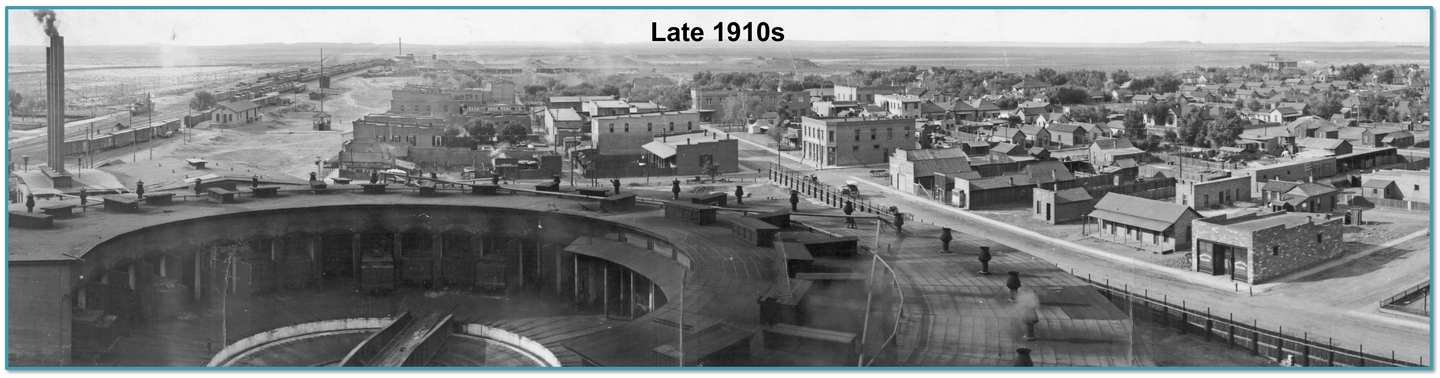
100 YEARS OF ROUTE 66 IN WINSLOW

An Introduction to Route 66

On November 11, 1926, the Bureau of Public Roads certified U.S. Highway 66, better known as Route 66. More than any other two-lane highway of its era, Route 66—with its service stations, motels, diners, curio shops, and scenic attractions—became a symbol of the freedom, adventure, and romance of the open road in America. For the last century, Route 66 has influenced Winslow's growth, heyday, decline, and renewal. The city's section of Historic Route 66 is the foundation of downtown revitalization, and visitors from all over the world make it a stop along their journey. *100 Years of Route 66 in Winslow* highlights the people, businesses, and sites along the city's stretch of the iconic highway, both yesterday and today.

Arizona's Route 66 Origins

The Beale Wagon Road: In 1857, the government hired Lt. Edward F. Beale to establish a wagon road along the 35th parallel, which crossed the Little Colorado River and continued west through the future townsite of Winslow. The Beale Wagon Road was an essential pioneer, military, and communication route during the 1860s and 1870s, and it later served as the base corridor for the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad (the Santa Fe); the National Old Trails Highway; US Route 66; and Interstate 40. At right, *The Beale Wagon Road* (circa 1984) by Winslow artist Joseph Cruz Rodriguez depicts the Beale expedition crossing the Colorado Plateau near the future townsite of Winslow. Lt. Beale famously used camels as pack animals during his expeditions in the semi-arid West.



The National Old Trails Highway: In the early years of the 20th century, motor vehicles became an increasingly affordable and widespread mode of transportation. As motorists and business interests demanded that the state and federal governments provide better systems of roads, this "Good Roads Movement" led to the establishment of named highways. Established in 1912, the transcontinental National Old Trails Highway connected a series of historic roads from Maryland to California that included the Beale Wagon Road. The photo at left shows the highway passing through Winslow on Second Street to the right of the Santa Fe roundhouse.

The Establishment of Route 66

As automobile ownership continued to surge, the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1921 established a national system of public highways that connected the urban and rural regions of the country. Instead of names, east-west and north-south highways were assigned even and odd numbers, respectively. On November 11, 1926, the Bureau of Public Roads certified the U.S. Numbered Highway System, including U.S. Highway 66. The US 66 Highway Association promoted the 2,448-mile highway as "the shortest, best and most scenic route" linking Chicago and Los Angeles. Dubbed "the Main Street of America," the new route connected a series of existing roads that included the section of the National Old Trails Highway that ran from New Mexico to Los Angeles, passing from one end of Winslow to the other on Second Street, seen below looking west.

The Heyday of Route 66

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, tens of thousands of midwestern farm families migrated from the Dust Bowl to California on Route 66, which John Steinbeck dubbed "the mother road, the road of flight" in his 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. In response to the Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal employed thousands of young men to work on infrastructure projects, and Route 66 was fully paved by 1938. During World War II, Route 66 was a major corridor for military convoys transporting supplies, arms, and troops to defense plants and training bases in the West. After the war, the route was crowded with veterans moving their families to the warmer western cities and towns where they had been stationed. The prosperity of the 1950s and 60s meant more Americans traveled, and many headed for the Grand Canyon, Las Vegas, or Disneyland via Route 66. Tourists stayed at the new motels and campgrounds, and they joined the residents of Route 66 communities in patronizing the new service stations, diners, curio shops, parks, and roadside attractions.

The Decline of Route 66

Post-war prosperity meant another sharp increase in car ownership and commercial shipping, which led to the overuse and deterioration of the federal highway system. Congestion and safety issues, as well as national defense concerns, prompted the passing of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 to fund the construction of the national interstate highway system. Route 66 would be replaced by Interstate 40 from Oklahoma to California, bypassing the cities and towns located on the old highway. Interstate 40 finally bypassed Winslow in October 1979, and downtown traffic disappeared overnight. The last stretch of Route 66 was bypassed near Williams, Arizona, in 1984, and the highway was officially decommissioned on June 27, 1985.

The Revival of Route 66

Soon after the route was decommissioned, travelers began leaving the interstate to experience the charm and authenticity of rural downtowns. Co-founded by Seligman barber Angel Delgadillo in 1987, the Historic Route 66 Association of Arizona assists Route 66 communities with preservation, marketing, and the centennial celebration in 2026. This public appreciation and organizational support have transformed Route 66 from a retired highway with a storied past into a vital and beloved tourist destination. Travelers experience the dynamic evolution of Route 66, viewing abandoned remnants of its past alongside businesses in repurposed historic and new buildings that serve both residents and tourists. Visitors hail from all over the world seeking a uniquely American experience, finding parts of Historic Route 66 still navigable while patronizing a reinvigorated auto-tourism industry.

Acknowledgements

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