Brennen Matthews | Foreword by Michael Wallis

Miles *to* Go

AN AFRICAN FAMILY IN SEARCH OF AMERICA ALONG ROUTE 66

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-8263-6401-2 (paper)
ISBN 978-0-8263-6402-9 (electronic)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022933140
Founded in 1889, the University of New Mexico sits on the traditional homelands of the Pueblo of Sandia. The original peoples of New Mexico—Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache—since time immemorial have deep connections to the land and have made significant contributions to the broader community statewide. We honor the land itself and those who remain stewards of this land throughout the generations and also acknowledge our committed relationship to Indigenous peoples. We gratefully recognize our history.

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FOREWORD

Michael Wallis

The book you are about to read has been needed for a long time. Author Brennen Matthews tells "a tale of living life and taking chances" on US Route 66, the legendary highway that has been celebrated by multitudes of travelers from around the world. Much has been written about Route 66, but this book offers a fresh look from Brennen; his wife, Kate; and their young son, Thembi—together, a mixed-race family—as they examine America from their eyes, from their African perspective.

To take the pulse of the nation, the family chose America's most enduring artery and headed straight for Route 66. They wanted to taste, feel, hear, and experience genuine America—raw and uncensored. And that is precisely what they found on the Mother Road, as John Steinbeck dubbed the highway in his haunting novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. They shunned the turnpikes and freeways and cruised America's Main Street.

What they found is that the historic highway winding from Chicago to Santa Monica, through three time zones and eight states—Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California—has new life and meaning. More than 85 percent of Route 66 can still be traveled and enjoyed, and its necklace of towns, cities, and enticements are as alluring as ever. Arguably the most famous highway in the world, Route 66 is forever reinventing itself. Never static but fluid and elastic, it remains a road of movement and change.

Travelers may still view distinct layers of history along the various alignments of Route 66 in all eight states. They discover palpable examples of the Roaring Twenties, the bittersweet 1930s, the World War II years, and the postwar heyday of the highway. They also encounter the scars and desolation from the limbo years, when the interstate highways threatened the old road with extinction. Finally, they experience firsthand the highway of today's popular revival period—an episode of Route 66 history that appears to have no end in sight.

That is because Route 66 is America's most beloved road. It remains a road for everyone—the filthy rich and dirt poor, blue bloods, rednecks, foreign and domestic tourists, bona fide open-road travelers, poets, priests, fugitives, and dreamers. Politically, it is mostly red states bookended by blue states, so the color should run purple—and purple can be such a lovely color. To many

travelers, a journey along this historic path of concrete and asphalt, which stretches across two-thirds of the continent, is as comforting and familiar as a visit to Grandma's house. Some have sweet memories of the road, while others harbor lingering images of overheated radiators, ice storms, bloody wrecks, and speed traps. Yet no one can say that this highway is in any way ordinary.

Route 66 is forever reinventing itself. Businesses open and close. Highway landmarks appear and then vanish. Heroes and heroines of the road come and go. Retirement, death, and bad times take their toll. Change is both inevitable and necessary. Change offers challenges. Change keeps the road alive and well.

The highway has yielded plenty of saints and also a good many sinners. A microcosm of the nation, the old road has plenty of scar tissue, much to brag about, and a bright future. It is an unfinished story—a work in progress. Route 66 will always be incomplete.

And as a son of 66, I believe in the value of understanding the entire history of the highway. We simply must know and understand our past before we can manage the present and aspire to a future. The old road is a mirror of the nation reflecting our society and culture. That includes the good, the bad, the ugly, the holy, the shades of gray, and the cold hard truth of life. That has always been the case. That will never change.

It was certainly true when the highway was born back in 1926—when all roads of the time were less than hospitable, particularly if the traveler happened to be black or red or brown or anything other than lily white.

From the birth of Route 66 through its golden years, a mixed-race family, such as Brennen's, would not have been welcomed at most eateries, gas stations, rest stops, or motels along the route.

In the difficult 1930s, Dust Bowl pilgrims, tenant-farm refugees, and disenfranchised and broken souls poured onto the road. All of them headed west, following the scent of oranges and lemons, answering the siren call of the ocean surf, escaping from the harsh reality of economic depression and drought and foreclosure. All of them going to the San Joaquin Valley, Bakersfield, Fresno, San Bernardino, or Los Angeles. All of them moving toward the growing fields, the ripe orchards and groves, the lush vineyards, the factories and airplane plants, and the sunny beaches of a new promised land.

For a large number of people, traversing Route 66 was never an idyllic journey. Our highway may have earned the title Mother Road, but sometimes—and too often—she could be an abusive mother and a delinquent and uncaring parent. Ask the hordes of Okies and Arkies, the dirt-poor farmers and tenants, the unemployed city workers who were billy-clubbed, spat upon, shunned, cursed, abused, cheated, and lied to by others blinded by fear and ignorance and hatred.

Today, as in the past, nothing is predictable on Route 66. There is plenty of adventure—indeed, the potential for an escapade lurks around every curve and

bend in the road. That accounts for much of the old road's attraction. For travelers from across the nation, as well as a growing number of visitors from throughout the Americas, Europe, and the Pacific Rim, this is an American highway that will never die.

Just keep in mind that it is a path for travelers who hanker for the hidden places off the well-beaten tourist path. Such a journey is much more personal than what the slabs of monotony called superhighways offer. On Route 66, travelers are not as distant from the ecology of the land and from the people who live there as they are when driving an interstate highway. On the old roads, travelers are physically closer and more connected to the land and the people.

Route 66 has evolved into a revered icon. It is a destination in itself. A trek down the highway is in order for all those who find time sacred and want to experience the America that used to be—America before the nation became generic. A tremendous revival has made Route 66 a symbol for all endangered two-lane roads. Although we cannot get along without our superhighways, it is good to know that Route 66 is still there as an alternative for those who value time and want to slow down and take the pulse of the land.

I am so pleased by the resurgence of interest in Route 66, a movement that started in 1990 when my book *Route 66: The Mother Road* first appeared. The success of this book later led me to join the great creative teams at Pixar Animation Studios to help create the first *Cars* film. When the film was in theaters, business increased by as much as 30 percent on long stretches of Route 66. I also acted as the consultant working with the Disney Imagineers to create Cars Land, the twelve-acre version of the fictional village of Radiator Springs come to life next to Disneyland in California. And, of course, I was delighted to provide the voice of Sheriff in all the *Cars* films and at Cars Land.

And now I am so proud and pleased to help unveil this new and exceptional Route 66 book—*Miles to Go: An African Family in Search of America along Route 66*.

I recognize an abundance of books have been published about Route 66 since my book first appeared in 1990, but I also know that there is always a demand and a need for more. Each book is different from the rest and contributes to the greater Route 66 story. The combination of all the books fuels the unprecedented renewal of interest in the Mother Road.

This book is truly an invaluable addition to the body of work about the historic path of well-worn concrete and asphalt. In telling the story of his African family's journey on Route 66, Brennen Matthews has made an important contribution to the legacy of the highway. He offers both a new voice and a new look at the Mother Road. Like the highway itself, the story Brennen so skillfully weaves is not in any way predictable. Nothing about this work is contrived. It is tailor made for open-road travelers and dreamers on a quest.

PROLOGUE

We discovered Route 66 by accident. It had been exactly eight months since our move to Toronto, where we had hibernated through the long Canadian winter, and the thaw of spring had triggered a restlessness. Sitting in front of my computer one day, looking for the best route to drive to sunny California, Route 66 jumped out at me. I mean, it literally exploded from the screen with its over-the-top, bizarre roadside attractions, fascinating history, and beautiful, quiet scenic roads and landscapes. I had heard of the fabled highway, but like most people, knew nothing about it. And other than a visit to New York, my wife, Kate, had not spent any time in America and was keen to explore. I schooled in Michigan for a few years when I was twenty, and had lived in California for a stint in my late teens, so Kate viewed me as a veteran expert. Never mind that it had been almost fifteen years since I last set foot in the States. But I had a growing hunger to get out on the open road, the wind in my hair, the vehicle pointed west, and the days unplanned. It felt good when we finally committed ourselves to the trip.

But before I share our journey into America, with all of its memorable moments, unexpected stumbles, and revelations, I must tell you a little of our story—Brennen, Kate, and Thembi's story—of becoming a family, of our unique life voyage, and of the shared desire to traverse our planet and explore. It's the story of our hopes and dreams and fears and uncertainties, and how they all coalesced at a moment in time when we made the decision that would take us west across America on that old road.

THE FIRST TIME that I remember meeting Kate was in the library during December exams week. It was 1997 and everyone at Daystar University was hunkered down, cramming for end-of-term tests. Outside, the hot wind blew wildly across the African plains in Athi River, Kenya; I was done for the night, and out of boredom wandered over to the bookshelves to search for something to read. I must have been pacing back and forth too much, as a soft but irritated voice said, "Can I help you find something?" That is the first time that I recall setting eyes on her. In front of me, books were sprawled across a small desk where the most beautiful girl sat, staring at me. She had big brown eyes, full lips, high cheekbones, and long, neat braids—and she had my attention. Unfortunately, she was not quite as impressed with me, and basically asked me

to stop distracting her from her studying with my "annoying" movements. I asked her if I could walk her down to her dorm when the library closed. She said no.

Kate, however, remembers our first meeting somewhat differently. She remembers striking up a conversation with me on the university bus one day while on the forty-five-mile drive from Nairobi to the campus on the dry, windswept Athi Plains. Our school bordered Nairobi National Park. As the only full-time Caucasian student in a sea of African pupils, I obviously stood out. I have no memory of this meeting. Regardless, during the five days of exam week, every date that I made with Kate got canceled. I decided that it was perhaps not meant to be.

Ready for a much-needed break after exams, I headed home for the holidays. But our stars must have been aligned, because our paths intersected unexpectedly several days later, three hundred miles away, at a local hangout in our hometown of Mombasa. Mombasa is the country's second-largest city and located on the scenic shores of the Indian Ocean. This time, however, there was an immediate connection, and our relationship grew quickly. We were engaged seven months later and married in July 1999, right after graduation. We were young, attractive, carefree, and ready to take on the world.

Over the next decade, our lives took on the exciting new responsibilities of adulthood. I had completed my master's degree and entered a high-profile career in the global charity sector. My work took us to many countries, working with international nonprofit organizations and local communities on improving health care, food security, economic growth, and education. The work was intense but enjoyable, and I felt like I was making the world a better place. Kate, who had graduated with a bachelor of commerce, also worked with various charities and companies in whichever country we happened to find ourselves. These were fun and insouciant years as a young married couple, and our energy and zest for life was boundless. But after nine years of marriage, something even more exciting was afoot. Kate was pregnant and our lives were about to change forever.

Thembi—meaning "trusted one" in Xhosa—was born one early sticky Nairobi morning in February 2008. After several hours of difficult and strenuous labor, our doctor announced that both Kate and the baby were in serious distress and an emergency C-section was inevitable. Kate was whisked off in a flurry of urgency to the operating room while I was left to wait and worry.

After what felt like an eternity, the operating room door finally swung open and the doctor announced, "Brennen, I would like to introduce you to your son, Thembi." At that moment, the reality of being a parent rushed over me with immediate clarity. I was a father. Inside of a large spaceship-like glass box was the most amazing thing I had ever seen. Sleeping softly, eyes closed,

wrapped up tightly in a swaddle, was my son. He had fought hard to be here, having to be resuscitated three times. He was beautiful. He was perfect. He was mine.

Being a new father came with many new lessons, life changes, and a realization that things I felt were so important before Thembi's birth, like my career, were no longer as significant. I was tired of the politics and uncertainties in the nonprofit world and wanted a change. I also wanted to travel less for work and be home more with my fledgling family. So, taking a leap of faith, I switched careers and became a full-time writer—a terribly frightening decision. I had indulged in freelance work for magazines and newspapers for years; I always loved seeing my stories in print and cherished opportunities as they arose, but I had never entertained the idea of making writing my career.

In late 2009, an opportunity arose to launch a new regional travel and lifestyle magazine out of Nairobi, *Destination Magazine*, and we jumped at it. We packed up our oceanside house in Mombasa and made the long drive north to Kenya's chaotic capital city and set to work establishing our new life. Kate joined the magazine's team as the digital editor, while I helmed it as the editor in chief. The publication opened up fresh and exciting opportunities. We featured fantastic travel and tourism destinations, shared candid celebrity interviews, and brought important investigative stories to readers that impacted lives. I never knew who, what, or where was next, and the adventure of it all was intoxicating.

However, after half a decade of this bliss, another new chapter was about to start. I turned forty and began a season that has brought more challenges and changes than I could have ever expected. The first half of my adult life had been incredibly busy, pushing and proving myself daily in all of my different roles—husband, director, father, writer, editor, friend. Our family of three had lived beautiful, easeful moments, and painful, difficult ones. I was happy and grateful. But still, turning forty brought with it an introspection—I was halfway to eighty. Was I half-done? This new phase ushered in sobering reflections of lost youth and innocence, as well as melancholy moments for all things never to be experienced again. And so, in the summer of 2015, we decided that we needed a fresh scene, away from Africa, and a chance to recharge our batteries. In another leap of faith, we made the decision to move to North America, where we hoped to find a fresh calling in which to invest two years of our lives before returning to Kenya. So the saying goes: Life is what happens when we are making our plans.

Leaving home is never easy, and while we were eager for change, the move was wrought with emotion. Adjusting to North American life in Toronto came with its trials and errors, challenges and adjustments, but we had some small wins. Thembi joined a great private school in our neighborhood, and our early

days were spent exploring our quaint new community, characterized by its many leafy forests and endless hiking and biking trails. But something still plagued us: What did we really want to do with our lives? Kate and I were about to celebrate seventeen years of marriage, and we were both struggling to get a footing in our new reality.

After a great deal of soul-searching and discussion, Kate had an idea—we'd go on a road trip and clear our minds and hearts. Initially, I was resistant. We were not working, so our finances were guarded; we had no clear direction, so our carefreeness was muted; and I was fearful for my family and our future. I did not want to make such a trip without knowing what my actual *next* move was. But the more I deliberated, the more that getting out on the road made sense. We had already invested countless hours on highways exploring the little towns within driving distance, but we hungered for a longer time away from our new home to seek inspiration. We knew where we would go—across the United States to California—and *now* we knew how we would get there: Route 66.

America is a land of opportunity, a place of endless diversity and constant self-reinvention. Before Route 66, there was the opening of the West by the railroad and the redefining of tourism via the ingenuity of people like Fred Harvey and Mary Colter. There was the Oklahoma land runs of 1889 and a myriad of fascinating and iconic characters who forever live in legend and lore. America holds a billion stories. Kate and I have always been tremendously intrigued by what lies around every corner, and the more we delved into our route plan and discovered what magical things waited for us, the more excited we became. Little did we know that this odyssey across America, from the prairies of Illinois to the sunny coast of California, would change our lives forever.

This is the story of how the most famous road in America has influenced so many lives and futures. It is a tale of living life and taking chances, of being given the gift of a quest and of taking on America full tilt. But more than anything else, *Miles to Go* is our story, the tale of a family from Africa taking to Middle America and consuming it completely.

INTRODUCTION

The tale of Route 66, also known as the Will Rogers Highway, America's Main Street, and the Mother Road, has a definite beginning and an equally well-defined ending—the enactment of the federal highway system in 1926 and Route 66's completed decommissioning in 1985. However, its story is not necessarily a simple one to tell. In fact, this story is not merely about a basic road that was built to ferry people from one location to another at all, but about a way of seeing and living life that has stubbornly refused to die. And so, with time and the changes that it brings, Route 66 has also morphed and adapted, offering salvation to some, ease of travel to others, and a romantic road for the multitudes to get out and see the "real" America in all its forms and fashions.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the use of automobiles became increasingly widespread, and the resulting need for better roads in America became quickly apparent. The poorly marked routes of dirt and gravel roads that had served as "highways" had ultimately outrun their life span, and something needed to be done. In response, Congress passed the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916, a measure that provided $75 million in matching funds to states to aid in the creation of a national network of roads. The program was then extended in 1921. During this time, Cyrus Stevens Avery, a real estate investor and insurance man from Tulsa, Oklahoma, who also served as a Tulsa County commissioner, had himself been lobbying for new and improved roads. By 1921, Avery was selected to become president of the Associated Highways Association of America, and two years later, in 1923, he was appointed as the Oklahoma state highway commissioner. Avery was a rising statesman.

With 1924 drawing to a close, the American Association of State Highway Officials (renamed American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials in 1973) proposed a new method of identifying routes that crisscrossed America, using a numbering system. Those heading east to west were ascribed even numbers, and those heading north to south were assigned odd numbers. Important highways were assigned numbers ending in 0. A twenty-one-member Joint Board on Interstate Highways was formed to oversee the creation of this whole network that connected existing local roads into highways, giving small farming towns access to their urban neighbors (and related markets). Avery, a member of the board, was tasked with identifying the most important routes of this new interstate highway system. This

responsibility gave him considerable influence over what eventually fell under the United States highway system, including a major roadway that linked Chicago and Los Angeles and passed through his hometown of Tulsa. As a matter of fact, Oklahoma ended up with more Route 66 than any other state except New Mexico.

After months of deliberation, the new federal highway system was in place, and what remained to do was number the new route. Initially, Missouri and Illinois state officials wanted the highway going from Chicago to Los Angeles to be assigned the number 60. However, Kentucky also wanted the highway that passed through their state to be given number 60, due to the importance of numbers ending in 0. After a great deal of debate and controversy over the number, Avery and his team relinquished the designation and settled on 66, which was unassigned at the time. Why 66? Avery liked the sound of the number and thought that it would be easy to remember. Avery is now lovingly referred to as the Father of Route 66.

Today, we ponder the "good ole days" and romanticize a history that was not always fair or easy on those who lived it. Route 66, first commissioned on November 11, 1926, was largely used in the 1930s by those fleeing the Dust Bowl in the southern Plains states (Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, and Texas) that resulted in starvation and ruined lives for an incredible number of families. Route 66 represented their best (and often only) chance for survival. It is estimated that during the 1930s, some 2.5 million people migrated west in the hope of finding agricultural employment, leaving the Plains states behind. This was even more significant to the development of 66, as proactive residents in the towns and cities that the migrants passed through recognized that they needed somewhere to sleep, eat, get their overladen vehicles repaired, and to simply take a break from the difficult travel. As such, the Route 66 economy was truly born, and towns along the highway blossomed and grew with the influx of travelers.

By the 1940s, the military was investing enormously in the development of training bases, with the majority of the construction and troop training designated to take place in California. As a consequence, the War Department (as it was called before merging with other military departments to become part of the Department of Defense) needed to improve the available highways in order to allow for rapid mobilization in the event of a war. This, once again, resulted in a dramatically increased economy for many of the towns along Route 66, as well as some major upgrades to the road. In places like Hooker Cut in Missouri, whole sections of mountain were removed to create space for a divided-lane highway, a significant improvement from the original two-lane route. In 1946, the song "(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66," written by Bobby Troup and sung by Nat King Cole, was released and became a huge hit. The success of the song poignantly reflected the spirit of this postwar generation

and their captivation with going west and "following their dreams," so much so that "Get your kicks on Route 66" became a popular catchphrase, and the most enduring travel story of Route 66, set to music.

As the 1950s rolled in and America began to stabilize with the end of World War II, there were tremendous strides in transportation and roadway development. Now more and more Americans owned a car, and with these newer, sleeker, faster automobiles came the need for more smooth-paved roads and places to go. Tracing its way from Chicago to California, Route 66 represented freedom and a chance to break from the norm and get out and meet life head-on. There was always a new adventure to be had and new places to see, and Route 66 was there to make it possible. After the economic devastation of the Dust Bowl era and two world wars, Route 66 represented, to the people of this period, a renewed spirit of optimism and a restored sense of the possible. The 1960s television series *Route 66* further propelled the popularity of the route by bringing it up close and personal, into American living rooms and lives each week.

Of course, by now, towns along the route were seasoned in rising up to meet every new opportunity, and with the extra spending power of the times, flashier diners, coffee shops, new motels, and novel attractions were born. Business owners used a wide array of ideas to attract customers and get them off the road. Nothing was too outlandish or insane—actually, the crazier, the better—and sky-high giant Muffler Men, impossibly vibrant neon signage, campaigns of endless billboards along the highway, and much more were unleashed on the traveling public.

As the road passed through natural wonders like Arizona's meteor crater, and across the bone dry but fiercely beautiful Mojave Desert of California, other tourist beacons arose to meet it. It was during this period, Route 66's heyday, that McDonald's opened its first restaurant in San Bernardino (1940) and its second in Des Plaines, Illinois (1955). For the towns and businesses along Route 66, things looked good. But it was not to last.

Today, the actual highway technically no longer exists. America's Main Street began its decline in 1956 with the signing of the Federal-Aid Highway Act by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who envisioned a highway system that would rival Germany's grand autobahn. With the advent of the more straightforward, much faster highway system, many towns on Route 66 simply died, cut off from the busy traffic of the new shiny tarmac. And so, when following the road now, motorists must carefully trace their way through the winding, twisting, turning direction that 66 once took. But that is where the fun is!

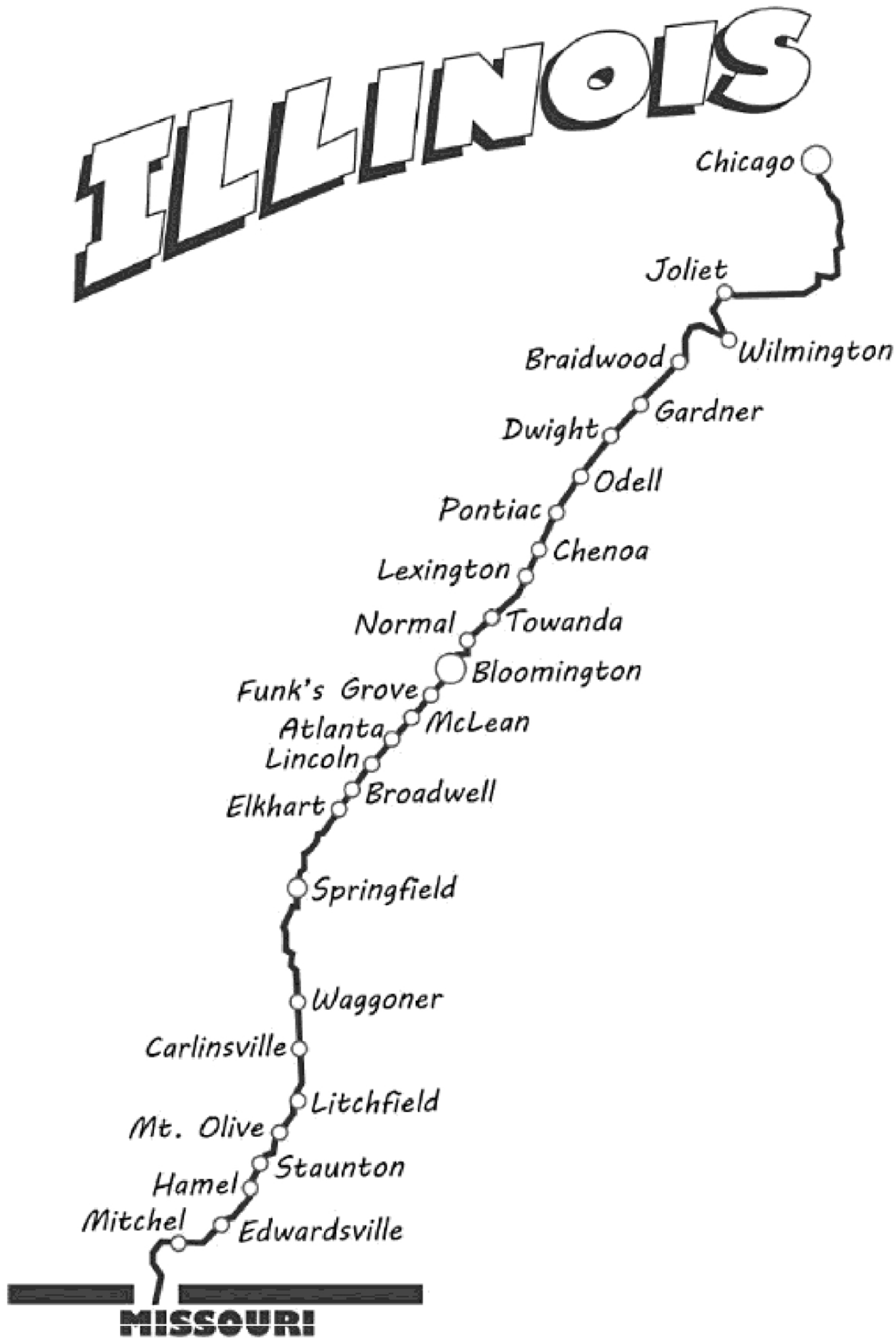
For many travelers, motoring down 66 creates an overwhelming sense of following in the important and ever-changing footsteps of history. Every inch of roadway has been traversed by an innumerable number of hopefuls and

dreamers, each with their own stories and aspirations, each expectant that their brighter future is just over the ridge, a characteristic that is most certainly unique to America. That is not to say that other nations do not offer their citizens, and immigrants alike, a multitude of life-changing opportunities. They do, of course, but there has always been something magnetic about America that draws dreamers seeking a better life. It is a land that romantically represents all that is possible in life, as its roads have inspired risk takers to follow the next bend to adventure.

But this is not a story just about Route 66—not entirely, anyhow. It is the story of our family's search for, and discovery of, quintessential America, while journeying down the most famous highway in the world. Route 66. With each mile that we traveled through diverse landscapes, the countless people that we encountered from all walks of life, and the unexpected circumstances that we constantly found ourselves in, we discovered the unquenchable, full-hearted spirit of America, and our own inspiration to keep moving forward. A life that has been lived is a life with some miles under its hood. We hope our story will inspire you to venture into the unknown too.

Part 1

In Search of Americana



1

IT WAS AN early August morning when Kate, Thembi, and I first set foot in the small town of Wilmington, Illinois. Dark, menacing clouds threatened to rain down on what had started out as an idyllic day. The town's quaint streets seemed strangely quiet, only disturbed by the odd passing vehicle slowing down to shoot a welcoming wave from an open window. There was a dreamlike stillness that intensified a song from a family of birds in a nearby treetop. Loud pops of thunder in the distance further intensified the emotive atmosphere.

We had driven our Volkswagen SUV into Illinois with hungry anticipation. Iconic USA, with its quirky and colorful diners, museums, restored petrol stations, and roadside attractions all glimmering in the sunshine and bustling with warm and welcoming people, would await us. Glowing travelogues had promised us that the "real" America still existed, and we only need show up to get a taste. And now there we were, standing alone on a cracked, deserted parking lot next to a timeworn, closed-up diner—the once-popular Launching Pad Drive-In—without another soul in sight, nor any brilliant sunshine to illuminate our first Route 66 stop.

Nevertheless, our Great American Road Trip on Route 66 had properly commenced, and the fabled Gemini Giant, an enormous Muffler Man statue named after NASA's second human spaceflight program (begun in 1961), towered before us. His green and gray paint chipped and slightly faded, he still stood, having endured the years and all the good and bad that time had brought to tiny Wilmington. There was a lifelike quality about this giant. At twenty-one feet tall and weighing 438 pounds, he could be imposing, but at that moment, he just seemed sad. The gloom of the day was reflected in the stoic expression on his fiberglass face, as if he held on tightly to a million stories. Someone had managed to wedge an American football into the bottom of his space helmet. It must have taken some real effort, but this didn't seem to bother him. He came from a time when spacemen had broad shoulders.

I cannot count how many times that, while preparing for this road trip, we stared at his picture in books and magazines, and on more websites than I can recall, but we were still totally unprepared to come face-to-face with Gemini. There was something distinctive, human even, about this enormous relic from a bygone era that moved us.

In the same manner, the beginning of a road trip—especially on a legendary route like 66, which has been touted for decades as the most famous road in America—held something tantalizing and magical for me and for my family. Now a footnote from a simpler time, similar to the route itself, Gemini seemed somehow reflective beside the then-defunct Launching Pad (originally the Dari Delite), a diner that had once attracted hungry patrons from as far away as Chicago, fifty-nine miles to the north. The words "Route 66" were artfully splashed on a nearby wall, their big, bold letters filled with images of a red sports car, a humble town clock, an American flag, and Gemini himself—a picture of Route 66's story in Illinois. The air was crackling with history.

A half dozen blocks on down the route, near the center of town, another fiberglass creature, much smaller in size, awaited our admiration. A bright-green eighty-pound Sinclair DINO, a remnant of the long-successful marketing run of the Sinclair Oil Corporation, stood atop the front corner of a classic porcelain enamel, streamlined box-style building that was once a Sinclair station. First opened in the 1960s, the building was now being used as an unremarkable-looking tire store.

Around the corner from the jolly brontosaurus's watchful gaze, we stumbled upon the Mar Theatre, a quaint cinema dating back to the 1930s, with its simple but distinctive art deco style mostly intact. They were showing one of the *Toy Story* films.

Thembi, who was eight at this time, said, "We need to come back here at night," his eyes fixed on the beautiful marquee and its many light bulbs.

A couple of blocks away, near the bridge that carries the route across the Kankakee River, stood a plain two-story building that, like many other structures in town, is easy to miss. Only a large plaque beside the door of the historic Eagle Hotel identified it, and its simple, dated appearance belied the fact that it's one of the oldest commercial buildings on all of Route 66.

While the route officially begins on East Adams Street in bustling downtown Chicago, it seemed fitting that we began our journey in Wilmington, under the shadow of the world's most famous Muffler Man. We were standing where so many had stood before us, and yet, it had felt as though we were discovering a history, a piece of America that was rare and especially our own.

With 2,389 miles left to go, we had a deep sense of anticipation of what lay ahead.

2

"THERE ARE MORE on the other side." A smiling woman motioned with her hand as she noticed me taking photographs of the life-size statues of 1950s icons James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and Betty Boop, which welcomed diners to Braidwood's Polk-a-Dot Drive-In.

With the Launching Pad long since closed and the early hour of the day, we found ourselves in Braidwood, down the road from Gemini and Wilmington, looking for some breakfast. At first, I was a bit embarrassed to be playing tourist, but the woman was so casual, almost dismissive, that I quickly realized that she must encounter camera-happy visitors like us all the time.

The Polk-a-Dot Drive-In was opened in 1956 by Chester "Chet" Fife. In its first incarnation, the drive-in was actually a bus that Fife purchased and painted in rainbow-colored polka dots, hence the name. But as business picked up, the Polk-a-Dot finally moved to its current location in 1962, where it continues to serve up classic American food like milkshakes, french fries, hamburgers—everything greasy right off the grill. With its signature white and light-blue theme colors and undeniable '50s vibe, the diner represents, for many, a picture of Americana that continues to define the nation globally. It's not difficult to visualize a busy Saturday evening there, with laughing teenagers, decked out in their coolest attire, driving up to the Polk-a-Dot in freshly waxed heavy-bodied cars, probably borrowed from their fathers, keen to show off their wheels and share in the local gossip. The diner's signature neon sign spinning slowly around, calling to the youth in the small Illinois town. Chuck Berry or Elvis blaring from the sound system.

Lost in my thoughts, I turned to walk around the restaurant but quickly jumped aside as a bright-red Toyota sedan crashed up over the curb and into the parking area, nearly making me a part of its front bumper. Three heavyset travelers emerged, almost frantically, from the traumatized little car, yelled at each other for a moment or two in rapid French, and then jumped back in. A torrent of choice words flooded my head, but before they could leave my

mouth, the impudent motorists disappeared like a bad dream, back down the unassuming road from which they had come. I looked to the waitress in expectation of shared shock, but she simply continued to wipe the diner's glass door, unfazed, focused on getting the restaurant ready for its first customers of the day.

It finally started to drizzle as thunder rumbled above. The air was humid, and the sky held the promise of heavier precipitation. Rain can have a way of altering the mood of a place and creating a depressing scene. Still, that morning, at the start of Route 66, in the solitude of small-town America, the gray and melancholy somehow enhanced the romance of the experience and made us feel more alive, more a part of something bigger than ourselves. There is something to be said about being lost in reverie. Not then, though. We needed sunshine. We were on the road and it was summertime. Hurrying back to the vehicle, I spotted Kate cozying up next to Elvis, taking a selfie. Raindrops covered her smiling face and dripped down her cheeks.

"What are you doing?" I hollered over. "It's raining, get in the car."

"I want to take pictures with the people I meet on the trip."

"People? It's a statue!" Maybe there was something in the air.

Undaunted, she rushed over to the Blues Brothers and struck a pose, joining in with their wacky dancing stance, one leg in the air. Looking at the photograph later in the car, it actually looked like the trio was dancing together, as though she were the third sibling. It made me laugh.

Across the road lay a peculiar scene. An assortment of misfit characters—a pink elephant, a giraffe, a polar bear, and a red bull with white horns and golf balls for eyes—smiled goofily in our direction from their chest-level, fenced-in enclosure. This was the Braidwood Zoo, a quirky folk-art installation established in 2012—although the term "zoo" may have been a generous term when the local creators were dreaming of this attraction.

"Dad, is that a giant white rat?" Thembi asked, pointing to one of the large creatures covered in what looked like shreds of white nylon. In fact, I wasn't quite sure what we were looking at.

I paused longer than he was comfortable with. "That one, next to the really skinny ... I think that's an emaciated cow."

It took some asking around before we discovered the identity of all of the inhabitants of this urban zoo. But that morning on North Front Street, Braidwood's portion of the Mother Road, the spectacle was right at home.

AFTER OUR ENCHANTING entry into northern Illinois, we drove south, through Gardner, with its two-man jail, and stopped to check out the beautifully restored Ambler's Texaco Gas Station at the intersection of old US Route 66 and

Illinois Route 17 in the village of Dwight. Once known as Vernon's Texaco Station, as well as Becker's Marathon Gas Station, the spot got its current and most famous name from Basil "Tubby" Ambler, who had operated it from 1938 to 1966. The historic filling station, which was originally built in 1933, is now a very popular photo op and the quintessential Route 66 Illinois stop.

An older gentleman was seated idly next to the bay doors, seemingly waiting to welcome guests. The village was quiet—the rain had dissipated as quickly as it had started—and it looked like we were his first visitors of the soggy morning. He appeared happy to see us. He introduced himself as Carl and told us that he was a volunteer. He worked at the station once a week and loved meeting travelers from around the world.

"So are you going all the way to California?" he asked.

"Yes, we are," we answered proudly. "So far, we've really enjoyed what we've seen in Illinois."

He looked pleased. "And you say you are all from Africa? Even you?" He gazed at my blond hair and blue eyes with suspicion. It was not the first time in my life I had been asked this.

"Yep, even me," I said.

"And what brought you over here from Africa?"

"We wanted a change."

"And you decided that Route 66 was that change?" he asked slowly. He sounded baffled.

I smiled. It was a fair question.

It was our first time engaging with the unofficial American tradition of retirees spending a portion of their free time volunteering at historic landmarks. It was a little uncomfortable; we felt a bit like we were intruding on his peaceful day and being a nuisance. But Carl couldn't have been friendlier.

"You know, I've never done the whole trip myself," he said. "I would like to, but it's just never worked out. I have done most of Illinois, though. My son lives in Springfield and I have a daughter who does real estate down in Edwardsville. I try to take Route 66 when we go down to visit with them."

As the minutes wound by, we chatted about Dwight and the town gossip. Carl was a fount of knowledge about local happenings. Kate and I listened and laughed, soon drawn into local politics and family dramas. Thembi busied himself looking around the two-bay garage. He was impressed by all of the aged tools and equipment amassed to remind visitors of the station's historic past.

"Dad, look at this!" Thembi called. He was seated up high in a bright-red 1914 Ford Model T fire truck, pleased with himself and the experience. Kate strolled over and joined him, climbing into the passenger seat.

Carl smiled and was about to regale us with some information about the vehicle when a carload of new visitors with a Michigan license plate arrived. They looked delighted with their Route 66 find as they rushed past us, toward a

plywood hole-in-the-face cutout of a welcoming service attendant, and began to take pictures.

Carl's attention shifted and it was clear that he was eager to speak with them. We thanked him for his time and decided to move on.

The heavy skies were slowly lifting, and the initial excitement of being on the highway was giving way to hunger, so we bought some pie and coffee from the Old Route 66 Family Restaurant across the road and stopped at a small park to enjoy our breakfast. There were a number of picnic tables that faced Route 66, offering a great view of the road. We sat underneath a large wooden canopy and listened to the insects come alive as the day began to slowly dry out. We were all alone, save for a few vintage vehicles that drove slowly past the park entrance. It had been a morning of chitchat and we were a bit talked out, so we sat and enjoyed being outdoors in Illinois, together in comfortable silence.

After an hour, we were done with breakfast and back on the two-lane highway, continuing south toward Odell. It was a journey of only twenty minutes from Dwight, but the deeper we ventured into Illinois, the more aware we became of the state's classic history, and the inherent need to slow down and embrace it. In today's crazy, manic world of always being on the go, it was rejuvenating to cast back sixty-five years and imagine how people once lived their lives.

We entered the town unexpectedly. That is one of the unique aspects of Illinois's section of the Mother Road; there are dozens of small towns that appear one after the other, the perfect introduction to the many Main Streets of America. We took left and right turns through the small community until we came upon one of the most photographed restored fueling stations in the state, the classic Standard Oil Gas Station.

Constructed in 1932 by local contractor Patrick O'Donnell—and modeled after 1916 Standard Oil stations in Ohio—the station originally sold Standard oil and gas for a mere twenty cents per gallon. In 1940, it switched to Phillips 66 fuel and, in order to compete with the other nine stations that fought for business along Odell's busy stretch of 66, O'Donnell added a two-bay garage for storage and service. Four years later, a bypass was constructed around the portion of Odell that housed the gas stations, and business began to dry up. By 1952, the station was in trouble and was leased by Robert Close, who owned a neighboring café. Close would go on to purchase the station two years later when O'Donnell died. In 1997, the station, through support from the Route 66 Association of Illinois Preservation Committee, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Then finally, in 1999, the association purchased the station from the Close family and donated it to the Village of Odell for the purpose of historic restoration. Now the tiny glimpse into seven decades ago is open as the town's welcome center and offers information and a myriad of memories.

Inside, we were taken aback by old black-and-white photographs and surprisingly simple vintage advertising that decorated the walls. Both Kate and I love period advertising. There is something so innocent, so unassuming about it, especially in our world of immediate information and knowledge at the click of a button. Consumers are jaded now and spoiled for choice, but back in the 1940s and '50s, things were different. It was the time when 20,679 physicians supposedly claimed that Lucky Strike cigarettes were good for you, and Cocaine Toothache Drops were only fifteen cents a pop.

An elderly, white-haired lady stood behind the counter, patiently waiting for us to make our way over. When we did, she was excited to tell us about her town and life on the Mother Road.

"I remember my father first took me on Route 66 back in 1944. He took me out of school, and we traveled for two weeks," said Mary, the volunteer at the tiny, picture-perfect refurbished fueling station. "Nowadays you wouldn't get away with doing that. But when I was a kid, things were much more relaxed and nobody really cared."

"That must have been really exciting! How far did you make it?" Kate asked.

"All the way to the ocean!" She beamed. "The road was much quieter back then and there were a lot more mountains." She paused and seemed lost in her thoughts.

"It's amazing how much things have changed," Mary continued. "But even back when I drove 66 with my dad, it was something memorable. Now we have people coming in here from all over the world. It has always been a very special road."

Thembi, who was listening quietly to Mary's stories about travels with her own father, was soon distracted by a frosted cooler behind us. It was packed with ice-cold beverages.

"Dad, can we get a Route 66 soda?" Thembi asked.

"A what?" I had never heard of the brand, but we were quickly discovering that Route 66 was a lucrative brand gimmick for many businesses.

"We've just had breakfast," I responded. "It's a bit too early for soda, Thembi."

"They are very tasty," Mary chimed in. "I really like the root beer."

"Why don't we all get one?" Kate suggested. "That way we can taste three of the flavors."

Route 66 Sodas is a Chicago-based brand of pop that uses sugarcane to sweeten their tasty drinks. They obviously know their market, as their products are found up and down the historic highway at strategic locations, tempting Route 66 enthusiasts like us—who don't generally drink a lot of pop—to try out their well-placed goods.

"I'll try the lime flavor," said Kate, while Thembi decided on the root beer and I landed on the grape.

Outside the Odell Standard Oil Gas Station, Kate, Thembi, and I stopped to enjoy our drinks and take in our serene surroundings. There was not a car or person in sight. A calm stillness characterized the town; not even the leaves on the trees shifted. It was hard to imagine that at a point in history not impossibly long ago, during Route 66's prime, the road in front of us was so busy with traffic that it was dangerous to cross. In 1934, the town had to build a pedestrian tunnel under Route 66, just so that people could get to the other side of America's Main Street safely. The tunnel, which is blocked now and no longer in use, is a reminder of how essential the old highway was at one time for those on the move. But it is also an indication of how quickly small-town America can be—and was—left behind.

To one side of the old station was a sign noting distances to various destinations: Chicago—87 miles; LA—2,361 miles. While it felt as though we had already been embraced by the road, we had, for all intents and purposes, gone nowhere. It was, for a moment, both exhilarating and overwhelming. Away from the crowds and the maddening realities of life back in Toronto, or Nairobi for that matter, time and monotony had forgotten us.