
AMERICA'S ROUTE 66: SORROW & CELEBRATION



In 1939 John Steinbeck astonished, angered and enlightened American readers with *The Grapes of Wrath*, his poignant new novel. The author had little confidence in his book at the time, fearing he had not portrayed the dust-bowl emigrants well. Yet the work has been translated into every known language, receiving worldwide acclaim and the Pulitzer prize. Over sixty years later, the Joad family's journey remains one of the most enduring—and emotionally moving—stories in all of literature.

Penguin / 21st Century Classics is publishing a CD-ROM version of Steinbeck's masterpiece, and it was a privilege for me to contribute to the project. Following is a brief selection from the new medium. I thought you might enjoy meeting the Joads again—out on Route 66.

Tom Snyder

It's a long road from state prison to anywhere. Like having to start way back when you were small—when no one trusted you to take care of yourself or to do anything on your own—except now you have to live through all that in a grown-up body.

You have to start all over with no rights from your old life and no way to earn any new rights, except to

take whatever the suspicious and the self-righteous hand you and not let yourself get mean inside. Or they win by getting you to lose again.

That must have part of what was going through Tom Joad's mind as he trudged along the highway, along the hard road back, marked by new clothes with the shabby fit and an unbroken-in cap, and

most of all, by an attitude plain for anyone to see. A con attitude that told everyone they'd better not try it. Not with him. Not anymore.

He was passing through hard-scrabble land, too. Not green and pastoral the way it is up toward Tulsa where Oklahoma's rich folks live, but tough like the hands of the people who work the land east of McAlester, where the state prison is, and around Salisaw, where the Joads began their heartfelt trek west.

The land was once good here, like it was in Colorado and Arkansas and Georgia. Like it was in a lot of places before the tractors ripped away whatever topsoil remained after God stopped dealing out the dust storms. And what knee-bending storms they were—fine grit and smokelike dust, so heavy in your lungs that you couldn't breathe and after a while, didn't care if you could or not.

Women and children died of the dust, locked away in their houses with the doors and windows sealed against the soot-black winds. Locked away where they died thinking they would be safe, while men with bandannas bound tightly to their faces, men who had only a few yards to walk back from the fields, toppled over to hock their last breaths in one of the endless barren furrows that held dust like the stock troughs had once held water.

So like the others you move on, away from the tractors and the banks and the men who say that they are just doing their jobs by pushing starving people off the land. You have to get away from everything that's happening to the people and the land—get away from a kind of failure that nobody can understand because the harder you work, the deeper your failure becomes.

There can be no sense to it. So you take whatever you can carry and go out onto the road. Out onto the main westbound highway that might at least take you to something different.

Out onto a highway travelers simply called sixty-six. And Route 66, a road that seems like a savior and a centipede all rolled into one, takes you onto its grainy, crackling, sun-struck surface and moves you along, past all the outcropping towns, like hundreds of legs along its body, and keeps you going, somehow, until you quit worrying about what ever it is that pushes you on.

Route 66 gives you a little of this and tiny bit of that, just enough so you give up thinking about where you'll sleep or whether there might be something to eat tonight—so you think only about getting to California, where the road runs smack into the western sea and you finally have reason to stop.

Until then Route 66 is an asphalt ribbon that keeps unrolling in front of you until you get where you are going or give it up. Give it up to expire quietly beside the road as so many already have or, worse, stumble away into a dying land that no longer has any need of you, a land that knows you only as another burden.



That was in the 1930s. Today, Route 66 is a road of celebration. For the highway that meant hope and life to so many was itself killed—cut through with the gold-tip fountain pens of bureaucrats intent on their own interests—and abandoned to a new-world vision of a highway system so grand, so inclusive, that you could drive the rest of your life on it and never see a traffic light. Connie would have loved this new highway, would have headed for it in a minute, would have caught the first ride he could to nowhere.

But Tom Joad and Casy would have seen the interstate system for what it was: a commercial transporter's paradise sacrificing every small town, every quiet, shady place along the route so that the shipments of industrial waste, bottled water and chicken wire could be more profitable and thus more numerous. So that the highways themselves would keep on growing and flattening everything in their paths. Who cares if a mom-and-pop diner on the edge of town goes broke because travelers are all ten miles down the road at an easy exit, buying soggy fries and dieselburgers? Who cares if main streets dry up and have to be boarded up? Who cares about any of it?

Happily, some do. A groundswell of tenderness and regard for old Route 66 surfaced just as the Mother Road was officially decertified and she was saved—reborn in celebration of a universal affection millions of travelers felt for a road that had seen them through everything from the bitterness of the Depression to the focused confusion of a two-week family vacation. Whatever the government does or fails to do in the future, Route 66 is now safe in the hands of the people. That in itself is worth some celebrating.

For all who retrace America's most famous highway today, from the plains through to the ocean, the experience is like no other. It's a road that gets right in your face with its history of sorrow, while you are bent on finding your own bright future, and then wraps everything up in an unfolding experience of rivers, plains, mountains, deserts and Main Streets that can just knock your socks off. Route 66 is a highway bright with contrast and unrelenting in the way it calls upon every one of us to look into our own experience.

And so we begin a brief journey on the highway that, for a time, the Joads and thousands like them called home. . .



West of Oklahoma City, where so many Okies got their first taste of get-the-hell-out-of-here, the land begins a metamorphosis. The gentle rolling pastures found along the highway through Miami, Claremore and Catoosa extend back toward the horizon. But ahead, to the west, just beyond the Canadian River shore, you can get your theme-park E-ride ticket punched. For even though Route 66 runs straight as a die through here, there are more stomach-dropping ups and downs than you'll find on any rollercoaster.

My dad had plenty of hogs and beef to sell, but no one had any money to buy with, so we ended up on the road like everyone else. I remember this section of highway, around Weatherford I believe it was, where we had an awful time. The hills and gullies are so abrupt that long lines of cars got trapped behind the slowest old wreck up ahead. Then it started to rain and the road at the bottom of each hill started to fill up and even the big trucks were getting stuck or running off the road. A farmer took us in, but we heard one family spent the night in a tree, the rain was so bad . . .

After Sayre, the land flattens some, but it's only a deception. At Alanreed, just after you cross into Texas, the road has to struggle its way up through the crumbling breaks of a great plateau that stretches all the way across the Texas Panhandle to New Mexico.

This isn't oil country, so the land owners here were still having a tough time as oil patches all around them were beginning to sell petroleum to the government at good prices. War was coming and many knew we would be fighting alone if England collapsed. A few Texas ranchers west of Amarillo did very well about then. They reasoned that if we had a big army we'd need a lot of food and they began building their herds. It was a good gamble.

Near the New Mexico border, the land takes on a tumbled, rocky character and Route 66 begins twisting and turning to find a way through. On both sides of the highway, there are beautifully tinted arroyos and box canyons rimmed with piñon. It's hard to see more than a short distance and there are hidey-holes everywhere. That's probably why Billy the Kid and other outlaws used this same route in their travels across the Southwest.

But the highway is also downhill most of the way into Tucumcari and not too tough until Tijeras Canyon just east of Albuquerque. Then it's a hard climb before there's any relief.

Mother and I stayed with family in Albuquerque after my father went west to work. About the time World War II came along, the big aircraft plants in California suddenly realized they needed more workers. A lot of men had been drafted and women weren't allowed in the plants yet. So they sent for the only laborers they knew about—the Okies that California had turned away. The companies formed big caravans and people went west again but this time like invited guests. They even sent some hill-billy singers along to entertain in camp at night and keep everyone from getting discouraged again. I even heard that one caravan had Woody Guthrie with them. He was pretty famous where we came from . . .

New Mexico was both easier and harder for Dust Bowl refugees than Oklahoma and Texas had been.

The land was drier and except for the low valleys, cooler against the brow. There might be day-long blizzards in the mountains on either side of Albuquerque in winter, but compared to the Plains, summer was a blessing.

The Joads would have seen enormous thunderclouds forming all around, higher than anything back in Sallisaw. The clouds would have seemed beautiful to the women, full and white and constantly changing in the winds that seemed to blow from all directions. But Tom and Casy would have worried themselves. The sweet-hued rainbows that formed across the azure sky would mean nothing to them.

For you could see, coming right out of the bottoms of the clouds, these broad sheets of rain—some maybe thirty miles long or more—and there would be whole ranges of them cascading down, one after another, black and full of heavenly venom. Lightning, there'd be that, too. Lightning wasn't so fearful because it only struck in one place at a time and you took your chances. But a rain squall thirty miles long, why, that could finish you.

Any worries the menfolk might have had were for nothing. If you look around much in this part of the country, you can't help but notice one thing. This is a desert. And the reason it's a desert is that those great sheets of summer rain never reach the ground. Somewhere in their ribbony descent, the water evaporates in the dry air. Not a drop would have touched the tented back of the Joad's cut-down Hudson. But they would soon wish it had.

Trouble was, there was no longer any water to be found along the way. Even Texas had some roadside springs but not New Mexico. So the Okies got their first taste of true greed along the highway that passed right through the frozen hell of the *mal pais*—lava rocks so sharp they cut right through your shoes when you tried to walk out on them, tried to walk out to see if there might be water somewhere.

But the water was all inside the screen-door diners and rutty little gas stations. Those were the only places for the Joads to get any. Gas—ten cents a gallon. Water—ten cents a glass. And they hadn't even got to the main bout with the great deserts of Arizona and California. These were only the New Mexico preliminaries.

Most of those families had traveled for weeks in old wrecks of cars, just to get this far. We didn't know how in the world they were ever going to get to the Arizona border, much less California, so we did what we could. The church women would pool their flour and lard to bake flatbread and biscuits and the doctors would go out every night to the Okies' camps along the highway. We fed the children and gave them such clothing as we had for them. The doctors tried to help kids that were down with fever and the old folks who were having such a hard time. Some weren't even going to

last the night and we knew it. That was the hardest part. They had nothing, those people, only pocket change for gasoline and the most courage I ever saw . . .

New Mexico just fizzles out at the state line and Arizona takes over with no fanfare whatever. This is border country on Route 66, a place no one cares about very much. The land is getting hotter and harsher, too. Shards of glass and quartz and burnt metal are sprinkled across every yard of highway; the Okies' old cord-bald tires don't stand a chance. Only technology gets us through today. The land and the careless blacktop haven't changed a bit.

At a bust-up called Two Guns, the highway angles along, taking the measure of Diablo Canyon. The engineers put an early concrete bridge in here—barely—and the road still seems indecisive. Ahead, the San Francisco Peaks warn and beckon at the same time. Through the wavering heat the mountains offer the promise of pine-tree shade and water along the eastern slopes. But it never happens. Route 66 swings wide, skirting the mountains' base, bringing the staggering emigrants into Flagstaff, another oasis they cannot afford.

West of Flagstaff, it's a brake-blazing drop down toward the rocky debris of the high desert. Past Kingman even the rattlesnakes take cover before daylight. There's the promise of the Colorado River near Topock, but the worst is yet to come. Below Oatman the quartzite mountains shimmer in the relentless sun and where rocks are turned over, you can see their true pink-amber color on the fresh underside. But the tops of all the stones here have been burned black by the sun. Solid rock, burned black.

Needles has never been a welcoming place. It's hard making a go of it here and always has been. And being right on the border still scrapes at the residents' sensibilities.

We didn't like 'em then and we don't like 'em now. They're all a bunch of fakes and cheaters. My dad seen that. The Okie men, they all carried two wallets. One they'd show you had maybe a dollar in it. The other one, that was where they kept it all. Always tryin' to get something for free. It's a wonder someone didn't shoot the lot of 'em . . .

Westbound out of Needles, Route 66 was both a relief and a terror, a real two-for-one, like a red-hot chili pepper dipped in chocolate mint. Getting away from the town was good but climbing west was god awful. Even today, on the smooth, easy-curving interstate, you can stand at the side of the road only a third of the way up and hear brand-new automobiles with powerful 200-horsepower engines shifting down from top gear as they settle in for the interminable grade.

Imagine, then, what it must have been like on the twisting desert two-lane that was once Route 66. Picture what it would be to struggle toward the sum-

mit with a load of kids and whatever you had saved from the home you were forced to leave. Sense the metal-on-metal protest of a decrepit car with a clapped-out engine that when new, maybe, *maybe*, turned out forty horsepower. Imagine yourself at the wheel, responsible for getting everyone through, and knowing, *knowing*, that you aren't going to make the top of the grade. And that when you can't, it will be all over. Or, even worse, that it won't.

Now imagine that somehow, *somehow*, you made it to the top of the hell-grade at South Pass. You've plugged the worst of the radiator's leaks and put the last of the used oil you've brought along into the ancient, chattering engine. But at least you know that the bad part is over, that no desert and no highway grade can devil you more than what you've just been through.

So when the engine has cooled as much as it will in early-morning temperatures of 100 degrees, you bundle everyone back aboard and slowly, tentatively bring your ravaged vehicle up to a walking speed. It will be long days yet to the lush inland of California, but you're finished with the worst.

And that's when you top a small—almost insignificant—rise in the highway and see before you, shimmering in the crystal desert air, not one mountain range but five of them, stretching out to the horizon like great waves of solid rock.

You pull a foot or two further to the side of the road and step out. The sun is impossible to get used to. No matter how hot the seats and side-metal, the unbroken sun is so oppressive that there is no feeling to match it. Such sweat as you have left boils to the surface of your skin, drying in seconds to a trickley residue of salt, leaving a feeling no one has ever quite described.

From under the blazing steel tent of your car, the children's eyes follow you with the confidence of desperation. My God, what will you do? It's the only question that is harder than the land itself.

From Kingman on, the Okies drove Route 66 mostly by night, their dim lights moving along through the dark like some drunken chain of fireflies, weaving from side to side on the highway as their ruined steering gear bid them—finding a place to sleep where there was none, finding food to eat where nothing grows, finding companionship in the midst of fear and hatred.

They knew what they were up against by then, somehow got through the blockade manned by hired toughs at the California border, and understood the clandestine nature of daily survival. Understood, too, that they were a force to be reckoned with, and if they stuck together, they might yet save themselves—save all of us.

We had a small amount of money put by. A fortune to some, I guess. And I remember stopping for the night in Barstow. It was way over a hundred, even after the sun went down, and father had a heart condition. I don't think

we ever stopped thinking about death. Mother had passed on some years before and my brother and I worried constantly. But that night we splurged on a motor court. My father filled the tub, soaked our bedsheets in cold water, wrapped us in them and that's how we slept. I remembered how someone once told me that dead people were always cold to the touch. And after that I was no longer afraid to die . . .

In Los Angeles, even today, it's hard to find someone whose family hasn't been touched by the Okie migration. Douglas Aircraft and Hughes and the Long Beach shipyards all hired dust-bowl refugees.

I knew a man well who left his home and family at thirteen because they could no longer feed him. He hitchhiked west on Route 66, worked in an aircraft plant all day and dug ditches at night, simply because he never knew there was so much work to be had.

When I met him, he was starting on his second million, or third, I forget.

But my favorite dust-bowl story comes from a woman who lived in Arizona during the Depression. She and her family went out to the road-camps along Route 66 each night to do what they could. Years later, as the Okie migrants got back on their feet in California, envelopes without return addresses began arriving in the woman's daily mail. Some held dollar bills, some only a nickel, but they kept coming until the families she once helped knew in their hearts that a precious debt had been paid in full.

It's all part of the sorrow and celebration of America and Route 66.

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