

The BYWAYS REPORT

The Scenic Route to Rural Prosperity

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CITY

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The Byways Report: The Scenic Route to Rural Prosperity

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The facts, observations and viewpoints expressed in this report are the sole
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Foreword

People often think of small towns and rural areas as being the same. But each small town has its origin story, its people and resources that gave it its unique shape, feel and sense of place.

When linked along a route — a byway — small towns use what makes them special to enchant visitors and boost prosperity, improving the quality of life for their residents. Tourism is an efficient form of economic development for towns and regions, as it doesn't require building infrastructure such as schools or hospitals to support new residents.

The Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City produced “The Byways Report: The Scenic Route to Rural Prosperity” to leverage the centennial of Route 66 in 2026. The historic byway runs across four of the seven states that compose the Tenth Federal Reserve District — Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma

and New Mexico. Oklahoma distinguished itself in its efforts to build rural prosperity along its 432 miles of what John Steinbeck called “the Mother Road,” and we focused our research there.

The report is intended to inform and inspire people who want to start or strengthen their town's use of route-based tourism for economic development. The research included a literature review, interviews with 31 local and national experts, and a site visit to people in towns across Oklahoma on Route 66. The report takes a storytelling approach to bring their work to life. The report includes best practices, challenges and triumphs that are relevant even as towns and regions differ.



WE FOUND TEN MAIN THEMES FOR THOSE WANTING TO STRENGTHEN OR START A BYWAY

1. Take an appreciative view of what your town has to offer visitors.
2. Think in terms of collaboration, not competition.
3. Don't try to do it all on your own.
4. Embrace entrepreneurship as an economic strategy.
5. Preserve your past to secure your future.
6. Make space for many stories to be told and for communities to tell their own stories.
7. Create experiences that engage visitors.
8. Pass the torch to the next generation.
9. Encourage volunteers.
10. Encourage the support of state officials and others by making the case that tourism is economic development.

THE MISSION OF THE KANSAS CITY FED IS TO SERVE THE PUBLIC TO PROMOTE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL STABILITY THROUGH LEADERSHIP AND PERFORMANCE EXCELLENCE.

Our community development team works to promote economic development and public understanding that supports growth in all communities, including those in low- to moderate-income and rural communities.

Rural communities are at the heart of the Kansas City Fed, one of the most-rural in the Federal Reserve System. Our boards and advisory councils include leaders from rural communities, economists conduct research and analysis that influences regional decision making, and our community

development team conducts outreach in small towns, across rural areas, and on tribal lands.

In fall 2025, the Kansas City Fed launched the Center for Agriculture and the Economy. The Center curates, houses and distributes timely economic research and data relevant to agriculture industry practitioners and rural communities. It also offers opportunities for industry professionals and community members to connect with Kansas City Fed experts, fostering programs and enhancing knowledge and connections in agriculture and rural communities.

Introduction

The best thing about traveling the back roads might be the sense of discovery. You're tooling along through the countryside, enjoying the view, when a sign tells you to slow to 55 miles an hour, then 45, then 35. You're coming to a town. You don't know what you're going to find. Each town is like a gift waiting to be unwrapped.

Driving on an interstate, you might see the side of the town meant to support travelers at an exit—fast food restaurants, a chain hotel, gas stations. Or you might see a sign pointing to the town miles off in the distance.

You spot evidence of local haunts that give this town its sense of place. The museum that does a beautiful job of explaining the place. The bike trail that runs through, or the bridge over a wild mountain stream. The bookstore in what used to



But traveling the back roads, you motor straight through that town. On the approach, there are old houses made of local stone or wood, the kind of houses folks mean when they say, "They don't build 'em like that anymore." Then you are in the historic business district, the original center of that community, with ornate two-story buildings on either side of a wide main street.



be the bank. The humble cafe with a 4-star omelet. The shop with handmade goods. Some empty storefronts, with the names of the last business still painted on the glass, and they're part of the story, too.

ROUTE-BASED TOURISM TAKES WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT SMALL TOWNS AND USES IT TO BOOST PROSPERITY

People sometimes think of small towns and rural areas as being all the same. But each small town has its origin story, its people and resources that gave it its unique shape, feel and sense of place. When linked along a route — a byway — small towns use what makes them special to enchant visitors and boost prosperity. In doing so, they can improve the quality of life for their residents.

Route-based tourism may not be a fit for every town or every region. But the *possibility* of it can lead residents to a greater appreciation for, and economic benefits from, the unique gifts their town has to offer. For that reason, it is worth a look.

But first, residents need to see what their town has to offer visitors, and that vision—or lack of it — may be the biggest roadblock. We heard this repeatedly, from byways experts and long-time residents. People who have lived in a town for decades, through the town's inevitable ebbs and flows, may judge its present against a past that now feels out of reach. Often, long-time residents cannot see what makes a town appealing to outsiders. They can be blind to the economic opportunities it provides.



Why is the Kansas City Fed writing this report?

PROMOTING ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL STABILITY IS OUR MISSION AT THE FEDERAL RESERVE

The Federal Reserve System works in the public's interest by supporting economic and financial stability. Most Americans know the Federal Reserve as the organization that sets the nation's monetary policy. By influencing the supply of money and credit, the Federal Reserve System seeks to fulfill a dual mandate: foster price stability and maximum employment.

What many don't know is that the Fed also works in communities,¹ because stable communities promote a more robust economy. Community development teams at each of the 12 Reserve Banks and the Board of Governors promote economic development and public understanding that supports growth in all communities, including low- to moderate-income and rural communities. Community development teams do this using applied research, public programs, outreach and technical assistance. These tactics help promote economic growth and financial stability in low- and moderate-income places, including small towns and rural areas across the nation. This report is one example.

¹ *Fed Communities* is the online source for stories, data and news about events related to the Fed's community development work. <https://fedcommunities.org/>

² <https://www.stlouisfed.org/community-development/publications/invest-in-rural>

THIS REPORT BUILDS ON PREVIOUS FED WORK ON RURAL PROSPERITY

One recent Fed initiative is *Investing in Rural Prosperity*.² The book, released in 2021, was intended to help rural areas navigate the challenges and opportunities they face to achieve a prosperous future. *Investing in Rural Prosperity* has 42 chapters, 79 authors and covers a range of topics. It shows stories of progress and highlights opportunities for action. The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis published *Investing in Rural Prosperity* in collaboration with the Federal Reserve Board of Governors in Washington, D.C. Community development professionals at many Reserve Banks, including the Kansas City Fed, contributed.

Tourism was mentioned in the Fed's 2021 book, and this report expands on that. We at the Kansas City Fed felt that byways – also called route-based tourism – could serve as a useful complement to other strategies covered in *Investing in Rural Prosperity*.

RURAL COMMUNITIES ARE AT THE HEART OF THE KANSAS CITY FED

The Kansas City Fed is one of the Federal Reserve System's most-rural districts. The Tenth District encompasses all or part of seven states: Colorado, Kansas, western Missouri, Nebraska, northern New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Wyoming. Our community development team conducts outreach in small towns,

across rural areas, and on tribal lands. Rural leaders are members of our boards and advisory councils, including the Community Development Advisory Council.

In fall 2025, the Kansas City Fed launched the Center for Agriculture and the Economy. The Center curates, houses and distributes timely economic research and data relevant to agriculture industry practitioners and rural communities. It also offers opportunities for industry professionals and community members to connect with Kansas City Fed experts, fostering programs and enhancing knowledge and connections in agriculture and rural communities.

ROUTE 66 CENTENNIAL IS THE CATALYST

The catalyst for this report was the upcoming centennial of a byway that runs through the Tenth District. In 2026, Route 66 turns 100. The eight states along Route 66 are restoring, refreshing and creating new attractions on the epic 2,448-mile road trip that tops the bucket list for many Americans and a surprising number of global citizens. Oklahoma distinguished itself in its efforts to build rural prosperity along its 432 miles of Route 66, and we focused our research there.



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ROUTE 66 IS ONE PART OF A BIGGER STORY

Route 66 holds a special place among byways. It has a unique role in the nation's history and culture. But there is nothing that the people along this byway have done that people along other byways can't do or haven't done themselves. We intend for this report to inform and inspire towns that want to strengthen their use of tourism for economic development, as well as towns that have never considered tourism as an economic driver. The report includes best practices, challenges and triumphs that are relevant even as towns and regions differ.

We have built this report on:

- A literature review of books and articles on tourism and route-based tourism, including Route 66. There are great technical resources available, and we have highlighted many of them throughout this report.
- Interviews with 31 individuals, including:
 - National experts on what byways are and how to start and strengthen them.
 - National and state-wide experts in rural economic development.
 - People who are strengthening small towns, restoring historic sites, building community, and telling their own stories in towns along Route 66.
- A site visit across Oklahoma on Route 66, to conduct follow-up and additional interviews and to allow us to share the experience of the state, the road, and the towns and people on it.

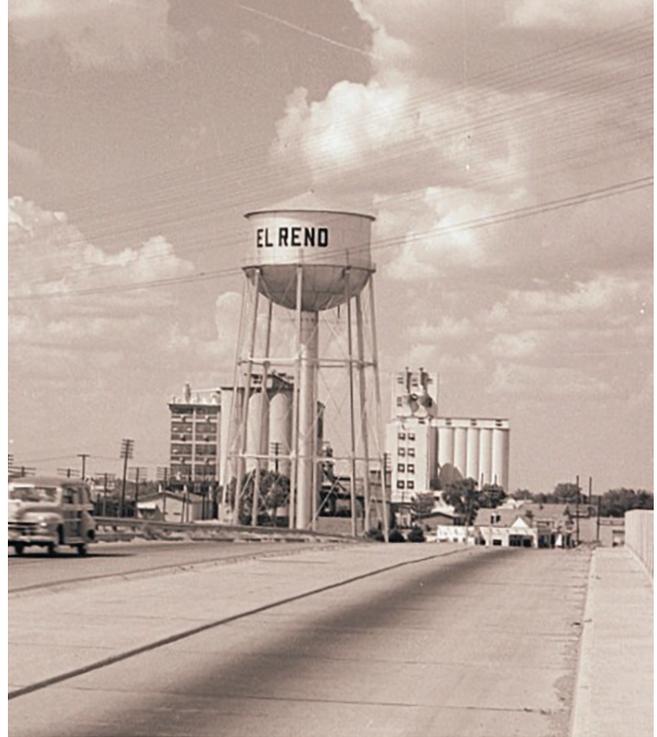
BYWAYS ARE WELL SUITED FOR SMALL TOWNS AND RURAL AREAS

Route-based tourism can be an especially good fit for small towns. Here's why:

- There are often miles between small towns, usually in the countryside, where it's pretty. They call them "scenic" byways for a reason.
- Towns can create their own byway based on their specific heritage and assets.
- One town doesn't have to carry all the weight. In fact, a byway works best when each town plays to its strengths. One town may have a renovated motel, another has a museum or shopping district or hiking trail, another local cuisine and so on.
- The things a town can do to entice visitors also make life better for residents. A byway can be the catalyst to improvements that help the town feel and be more prosperous.

Byways tap into a love affair Americans have had with road trips since the first Model T rolled off the assembly line. Road trips were still the most popular form of travel (40%) in 2024, according to one study,³ along with slow travel (traveling without a plan) (22%) and multi-generational family trips (21%). Another study⁴ found that more than 75% of American adults intended to take a road trip in the summer of 2024. While 42% said they would drive less than 500 miles from home, about 33% said they planned to drive more than 500 miles from home. This ongoing love of the road offers economic opportunity to small towns and rural areas.

³ "These are the travel trends that shaped 2024," Talker Research, November 20, 2024. <https://talkerresearch.com/these-are-the-travel-trends-that-shaped-2024/>



The approach to El Reno, Oklahoma, on Route 66. Image courtesy the Oklahoma Historical Society.

ANY BYWAY IS A CONNECTOR BETWEEN COMMUNITIES

To Americans, Route 66 symbolizes freedom. From Chicago to the Santa Monica Pier, the road has maintained a hold on the American imagination. It also draws tourists from around the globe, many who ship their motorcycles and travel Route 66 in packs. Today, Rhys Martin met with motorcyclists from Germany. Yesterday, it was the Czech Republic. Martin is president of the Oklahoma Route 66 Association and manager of the Preserve Route 66 initiative for the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

"Route 66 entered legendary status as a symbol of freedom and growth," Martin said. "But at the end of the day, it's just a road. It connects communities." Any byway can build prosperity by embracing the community that exists across the road. "If Route 66 was just a two-lane highway that went through the country, you might get some cool photo ops. But it's the people on Route 66 that travelers will say is their favorite part of the trip."

⁴ "Summer Travel Survey 2025," The Vacationer, August 11, 2025. <https://thevacationer.com/summer-travel-survey-2024/>

Martin sees the people in one town working together with people in the next town for tourism. If you stop at Gary's Gay Parita Service Station in Paris Springs, Mo., George will tell you to visit Mary Beth at Buck Atom's Cosmic Curios in Tulsa, Okla., and Mary Beth will tell you to see Michael at Gasoline Alley in Sapulpa, Okla. "The best lesson that can be extrapolated from what Route 66 has become is, you can't force it to be in a song, and you can't force it into a Steinbeck novel, but you can still embrace any byway as a connector between communities."

OUR RESEARCH FOUND TEN MAIN THEMES TO STRENGTHEN OR START A BYWAY

We asked each national expert and each person we talked to along Route 66 for advice on pursuing byways as an economic development strategy. When viewed from the perspective of a reader who wants to strengthen or start a byway, ten themes were most prominent. The ten do not, however, include nearly all the advice we received from our sources, which you will find throughout this report.

Items are in the order in which they appear.

1 Take an appreciative look at what your community has to offer visitors. View your town from a fresh perspective or hear from people new to the town to get a brighter vision of the town's assets.

2 Think in terms of collaboration, not competition. Look for ways your town can work with others in the region, or ways your business can promote other businesses along a byway.

3 Don't try to do it all on your own. Rural development hubs and destination marketing

organizations can position a byway for success. Make friends with the ones in your region.

4 Embrace entrepreneurship as an economic strategy. Visitors want an authentic, local experience and that is what local entrepreneurs can provide.

5 Preserve your past to secure your future. The historic buildings and cultural attractions pull visitors to your town. Keeping history relevant to residents can build support for preservation.

6 Make space for many stories to be told and for communities to tell their own stories. The more stories, the more potential visitors are drawn to the byway. If your community's story is missing, speak up and build partnerships.

7 Create experiences that engage visitors. Whatever is authentic to your byway, use it to build experiences. Many visitors find the people most memorable, so try to involve residents.

8 Pass the torch to the next generation. Younger people may love the town for different reasons than older residents do and see new opportunities. When passing the torch, be respectful, consistent, and willing to be vulnerable.

9 Encourage the volunteers. They bring passion, skill and pride to byways. Honoring volunteers can inspire others to contribute time and talents.

10 Encourage the support of state officials and others by making the case that tourism is economic development. Outside support such as state funding and promotion makes a huge difference.

Back roads, byways journeys are America at its best

It is 9:27 a.m. on Wednesday, June 4, 2025. The thunderstorms that swept through Vinita, Okla., yesterday have moved east. The storms kicked up serious wind last night, and neon is fragile. By nightfall, the cowboy on the Western Motel's new neon sign had gone dark. I am glad to see him lit up again in the morning.



It's the start of a site visit to talk to those in Oklahoma who live and work along Route 66, learning about their efforts to help Route 66 thrive. Oklahoma has more drivable miles of Route 66 than any state – 432 – and is home to some of its most recognizable attractions. This morning, I am eager to visit one of them for the very first time. I am headed to Catoosa to see the Blue Whale.

This goofy, exuberant whale is an icon on Route 66. I am one of thousands of visitors drawn to the story of Hugh Davis, a retired zoologist who wanted to surprise his wife Zelta with a gift on their anniversary. She collected whale figurines, so why not create a massive blue concrete whale to ornament

their pond? The whale, 20 feet tall and 80 feet long, took Hugh and a friend two years to build. Hugh presented it to Zelta in 1972 on their 34th wedding anniversary. The gift is, to use a word that sums up the entire Route 66 experience, idiosyncratic.

The Blue Whale is a striking example of what builds a successful byway. Whether it's a particular scenic vista, a historic town square, or a grinning concrete whale, byways link places that matter to people. This does not, however, ensure these places survive.



Many sites have been lost or nearly lost, including the Blue Whale of Catoosa.

Hugh had intended the Blue Whale as a private site, for use only by the Davis's grandchildren, but the public had other ideas.⁵ Travelers on Route 66 dove off the tail, swam in the lake, picnicked and fished. Then, in 1988, Hugh and Zelta closed the pond to the public. They were unable to maintain the site.

Michael Wallis visited Catoosa while writing "Route 66: The Mother Road." He found the once popular tourist stop had fallen into decay. "Floating in the murky pond is a large fading blue whale. Sunbathers used to rest on its back and kids dove from its big gaping mouth frozen in a perpetual smile. The wooden docks along the banks are slowly rotting and no one goes near the round picnic tables.... Visitors are clearly no longer welcome. One sign says KEEP OUT OR EAT LEAD."⁶

⁵ "Blue Whale of Catoosa Visitor's Center: Preliminary Design," Studio 45 Architects, February 25, 2025. https://core-docs.s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/documents/asset/uploaded_file/4301/catoosacity/5456215/Blue_Whale_of_Catoosa_-_Plans_2025.pdf

⁶ Michael Wallis, "Route 66: The Mother Road," St. Martin's Press, 1990.

That could have been the end of the Blue Whale, but it was not.

Starting in 1997, the local chamber of commerce, the city of Catoosa, and fans of the Mother Road pitched in to refurbish the whale. In 2020, the city bought the 14-acre property and turned it into a city park. In 2025, the city announced plans for a new visitors center, playground, trail, fire pit and whale tail sculpture to be completed during the centennial.

The Blue Whale of Catoosa, it appears, is safe.

A train whistle splits the air. To my right, an orange westbound BNSF freight pulls up alongside me as I drive. Normally, traveling on the interstate, trains are way off in the distance. Not here. Not on this narrow ribbon of highway. The train is maybe 300 yards away, separated only by brush. The sheer size of the train, its power and noise so close by, are overwhelming. The freight and I travel side by side until eventually I hit the gas and leave the train behind.

The Blue Whale is calling.



Byways can be designated nationally or at the state and local levels

A “byway” is a general term for a road that links places for the purpose of encouraging travel along its route. Byways encourage travel from town to town, with people proceeding from attraction to attraction along a specific roadway.

While national and state departments of transportation oversee all officially designated byways, they focus on road safety rather than tourism and economic development. To fulfill the economic potential of byways, governments often involve other agencies and organizations. They can include everything from tourism to natural resources, the historical society to commerce, and more.



While some byways are recognized as part of the nationally designated byways program called America’s Byways, most are not. For the purposes of this report, if the route has a name, an itinerary with a start and finish along a roadway that links communities for the purposes of tourism, we are calling it a byway.

AMERICA’S BYWAYS IS THE NATIONAL DESIGNATION

⁷ America’s Byways: <https://fhwaapps.fhwa.dot.gov/bywaysp>. The website includes an interactive map of byways for each state.

America’s Byways⁷ is the umbrella term for the 184 roads the U.S. Secretary of Transportation has designated either National Scenic Byways or All-American Roads.

National Scenic Byways must be considered regionally significant. They must have at least one of six “intrinsic qualities”:

- Archeological
- Cultural
- Historic
- Natural
- Recreational
- Scenic

The National Scenic Byways Program was established in 1991. Starting from the early days of motorized transportation, however, states promoted scenic roads using scenic overlooks, markers, and beautification projects.

Out of habit, people often insert the word “scenic” when they talk about byways. Not every byway is a scenic byway. Many are distinguished by one of the other qualities. Route 66, for example, is a historic byway.

All-American Roads set a higher bar. The road or highway must be considered a “destination unto itself,” meaning someone would make the drive the main reason for the trip. These byways must meet the criteria for at least two of the six qualities listed above.

When a byway covers multiple states, like Route 66, each state has the option to apply for national designation. That’s why some states along a multi-state byway have the designation and some don’t.

RESOURCE

All-American Roads and National Scenic Byways

America’s Byways® is the umbrella term for the collection of 184 roads designated by the U.S. Secretary of Transportation. America’s Byways include National Scenic Byways and All-American Roads.

Click on any state in the map to see a listing for that state, with links to local information.

<https://fhwaapps.fhwa.dot.gov/bywaysp>

STATE AND TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS ALSO NAME AND PROMOTE BYWAYS

For a road to be named a national byway, it must first be designated a state, tribal or federal agency byway. The process for achieving state designation is different in each state. While states submit some of their byways for national designation, they typically name a larger pool of byways than they submit to the National Scenic Byways program.

For example:

- Kansas⁸ has 12 byways, nine scenic and three historic. Two of the nine scenic byways – Flint Hills and Wetlands & Wildlife – are also designated National Scenic Byways.
- Nebraska⁹ has nine byways, including two National Scenic Byways – Lincoln Highway and Sandhills Journey – and seven state byways.

⁸ <https://www.travelks.com/things-to-do/byways-and-highways/byways/> has information on the 12 Kansas byways.

⁹ <https://visitnebraska.com/things-to-do/scenic-byways-promotes-its-nine-byways>.

Cottonwood Falls along the Flint Hills Scenic Byway in Kansas. Photo by Donnie Morehouse.





Buffalo grazing along the Flint Hills Scenic Byway in Kansas. Photo by Donnie Morehouse.

RESOURCE

State byway requirements for your state

If you want to get a byway named a scenic byway in your state, you need to know the process. While the steps for getting that official designation differ from state to state, they do have requirements in common, such as having a corridor management plan. Scenic America offers guides to each state's process for designating state scenic byways and links to existing byways in that state.

<https://www.scenic.org/take-action/resources/scenic-byways-resources/guide-to-creating-scenic-byways/>

Scenic America (<https://www.scenic.org/>) advocates for scenic conservation and helps communities that want to protect their unique qualities.

CITIES AND REGIONS ALSO CREATE BYWAYS TO ATTRACT VISITORS

Smaller communities can work together to create and promote byways. They can go through the process of applying to be a state scenic byway, or operate as independent attractions.

One example is the Highway 13 Butterfly Trail,¹⁰ a 292-mile corridor that will pass through 12 counties in western Missouri. It's a grassroots effort, driven by people who retired after careers at rural non-profits. The group began by engaging partners such as University of Missouri Extension, Missouri Conservation Department, and the Smithsonian Institution. The trail is expected to feature gardens, art installations, educational centers and research facilities.

ROUTE 66 IS NOT THE ONLY ROUTE IN OKLAHOMA

Along with four national scenic byways and four state scenic byways,¹¹ Oklahoma also uses less structured trails to get people moving around the state.

- The Oklahoma Fishing Trail¹² is designed for anglers. The trail contains six loops, organized by lake and fish species, and maps include a link to acquire a digital fishing license. Find out where to snag bass, crappie, and catfish along with unique specimens like paddlefish.

¹⁰ "Butterfly trail aims to provide place for pollinators, entice ecotourists, Missouri Business Alert, June 3, 2025. https://www.missouribusinessalert.com/industries/butterfly-trail-aims-to-provide-place-for-pollinators-entice-ecotourists/article_1791b31c-503c-4d14-90d0-6a2ebef83b8f.html

¹¹ Oklahoma's Scenic Byways, Travel Oklahoma. <https://www.travelok.com/articles/oklahomasscenicbyways>

¹² Oklahoma Fishing Trail, Travel Oklahoma. <https://www.travelok.com/fishing-trail>

- The Oklahoma Music Trail¹³ is a series of itineraries built around the lives of Oklahoma musicians, from Charlie Christian and Garth Brooks to Hoyt Axton and The Flaming Lips.
- The Oklahoma Civil Rights Trail, in the process of being created, highlights Oklahoma's

contributions to the Civil Rights Movement. The trail will connect historically all-Black towns and locations significant to the Civil Rights Movement, including Native American sites.^{14, 15}

¹³ *Oklahoma Music Trail, Travel Oklahoma.* <https://www.travelok.com/music-trail/>

¹⁴ *"Measure to create Oklahoma Civil Rights Trail signed into law," Oklahoma Senate Press Release, June 8, 2023.* <https://oksenate.gov/press-releases/measure-create-oklahoma-civil-rights-trail-signed-law>

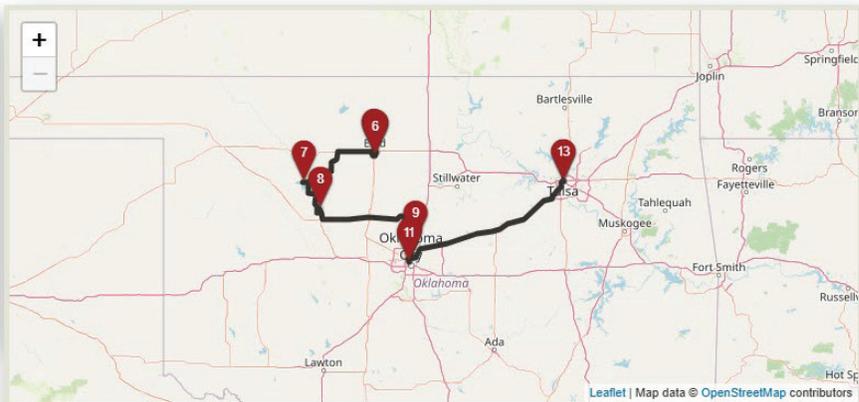
¹⁵ *"Oklahoma Civil Rights Trail Grant Program, Program Requirements," Oklahoma Historical Society.* <https://www.okhistory.org/about/crt-grants>

JOE DON ROONEY ITINERARY



The story of Rascal Flatts guitarist and singer Joe Don Rooney starts in Picher, now an Oklahoma ghost town. Although his hometown is inaccessible to tourists, fans can still see some of the nearby points of interest that shaped Rooney's early life. Check out some of these popular places that Joe Don Rooney frequented while growing up.

LEONA MITCHELL ITINERARY



When Leona Mitchell was growing up in Enid, her outstanding vocal abilities were showcased all over town. Hit the road and discover the venues and classrooms where Mitchell's voice came to life. Travel Leona Mitchell Boulevard and discover the school where she learned to play piano and violin and where her talent was first recognized.

Tourism is serious economic development for rural areas

Community leaders may think of tourism as just “the fun stuff.” In fact, tourism is a powerful tool for economic development, Maree Forbes Gaughan said. “This is the most efficient form of economic development they can do as a single community or a region.” Visitors stay in hotels, eat in restaurants, buy mementos, and share their experiences on social media. “You didn’t have to build schools or hospitals or any of those kinds of things,” she said, to achieve the economic benefit.

Forbes Gaughan is managing director of the National Travel Center, founded in 2014 to help small towns, rural areas, and scenic and historic routes achieve economic development through tourism. She is the author of “Tourism: Economic Development for Any Size Community.” Previously, she was director of marketing and outreach for the National Scenic Byway Association and professor of destination management and marketing at Temple University. She has worked on, advised, or helped plan nearly 450 of America’s 1,100-plus byways.



NATIONAL
TRAVEL
CENTER



Maree Forbes Gaughan, managing director of the National Travel Center

During the pandemic, when many Americans living in cities and suburbs rediscovered small towns, she and her team wrote grants and created byways itineraries using the USDA Rural Business

Development program for funding. “When people couldn’t go anywhere else during the pandemic, they got back out into the country and it was like, ‘Oh my goodness,” Forbes Gaughan said. The lure of byways is nothing new to her; she’s traveled byways in all 50 states. “They are such treasures,” she said. “In today’s hectic world, where families don’t have time to take a breath, [byways] can be a very refreshing experience.”

RESOURCE

“Tourism: Economic Development for Any Size Community”

The book is a comprehensive guide for communities that want to make the most of what tourism has to offer. The author, Maree Forbes Gaughan, is managing director of the National Travel Center.

The book offers action steps communities can take to ramp up tourism, such as adapting to tourism trends, delivering great experiences, building on what makes the community special, using pre-designed itineraries along with byways and trails to make travel easy, and using the quality of place to draw visitors.

DETERMINING THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF BYWAYS

Calculating how much money byways bring into a community or region is challenging, according to Forbes Gaughan and other experts. Lodging is the only category of expenditure that’s unique to visitors. Counting the number of visitors in a town or at a site at any one time is difficult and labor-intensive, as is discerning who is there because they intentionally sought out the byway, who stumbled upon it, and who is local – and then capturing how much the visitors are spending.



National Travel Center worked with LaGrange County in Indiana to create the Amish Backroads Byway in the west and the Agricultural Heritage Trail in the east, inviting travelers onto quiet country roads. Buggies, barns, quilt shops and farmsteads reveal the story of a county that is almost entirely working farmland.

The National Travel Center wanted an economic impact number that could be used with any collection of byways. They consulted multiple studies of byways of different sizes. After removing the most heavily traveled byways from their analysis (like the Blue Ridge Parkway) so their results wouldn’t be skewed, they found that a byway can feasibly generate between \$250,000 and \$450,000 per mile per year in visitor spending, when the following criteria are met:

- The byway features heritage and cultural locations, which draw the highest per-visitor expenditure.
- It offers visitors plenty of places to visit and opportunities to spend money.
- It includes destination-distinctive accommodations and local cuisine.
- The byway is well-promoted.¹⁶

¹⁶ Forbes, Maree. *The Economic Impact of Scenic Byways and Scenic Roads*, National Scenic Byway Association. <https://kansascityfed.org/documents/11394/The-Economic-Impact-of-Scenic-Byways-and-Roads.pdf>



National Travel Center partnered with Centre County, Pennsylvania, to make application for the Agricultural Heritage Scenic Byway, giving visitors an easy way to leave the bustle of Penn State behind.

RESOURCE

Studies of the economic impact of various scenic byways

Scenic America shares studies that demonstrate the economic benefits “to identifying, protecting, and promoting scenic byways.” As of July 2025, the studies posted on the website included the Cherokee Hills Scenic Byway in Oklahoma, Paul Bunyan Scenic Byway in Minnesota, Louisiana Scenic Byways, Scenic Byway 12 in Utah and more.

<https://www.scenic.org/take-action/resources/scenic-byways-resources/economic-impact-of-scenic-byways/>



National Travel Center collaborated with Chester County, Pennsylvania, to develop a byway that follows the powerful story of the Underground Railroad.

LONG-TIME RESIDENTS MAY BE CHALLENGED TO SEE THE POSSIBILITIES

When someone has lived in a place for decades, it can be difficult to see the charms of the area, we heard repeatedly during our research. An outsider may swoon at a small town’s massive stone bank building or delight at the retro bowling alley, while the long-term resident sees chipped paint and empty storefronts. Much of Forbes Gaughan’s job is inviting community leaders to view their small towns and rural areas with fresh eyes and an appreciation for how outsiders might experience them. “I never again want to hear the statement, ‘Why in the world would anyone want to come here?’” she said.

Newcomers in key positions can help. In one instance, a new tourism director in northern Indiana asked Forbes Gaughan for help devising a strategy to draw visitors to the county, which is 79%

farmland. “We said, turn what you have into a tourism experience, and that’s what we’re doing,” Forbes Gaughan said. “The western side of the county, there are no billboards on the entire road, and the farms are just the neatest, most crisply groomed places you’ve ever seen.”

Sometimes tourism assets hide in plain sight. When the mining company left one Idaho town, long-time economic development leaders were adamant that the community had nothing that would attract tourists. “They’re sitting at the edge of a gold-level dark-sky reserve,”¹⁷ Forbes Gaughan said. “They have a professional circuit rodeo. They have a national monument right down the road, plus 20 other outdoor recreational places and 10 of Idaho’s highest peaks.” The mayor, a new resident, was able to encourage a fresh look at the town’s potential.

¹⁷ A dark sky reserve is a land possessing exceptional quality of starry nights that is specifically protected for its scientific, natural, educational, or cultural value. <https://mcdonaldobservatory.org/dark-sky-reserve>



National Travel Center partnered with the Wyoming Tourism Office to craft visitor-ready itineraries for each of the state’s byways, turning drives through high plains, rugged passes, and river valleys into frontier journeys where every rural corner of Wyoming has a small town ready to welcome roadtrippers.

Rural development hubs can pull the region together

For a byway to thrive, people need to work together across its length. For specific reasons, this may be challenging for rural places. In small towns, the number of humans available to get things done is often limited. “The same five people do everything” is a common refrain. A culture of competition with other communities may be the default, as one small town may have a football rivalry with another town down the road. And people who do rural economic development have less opportunity to find new approaches and build capacity by attending conferences than their urban counterparts. When they do, rural issues may be an afterthought, not on the agenda.



Janet Topolsky, recently retired executive director, Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group

“Many rural places are isolated,” Janet Topolsky said. “They may think they’re the only ones dealing with a challenge.” Topolsky wrote “Turning Points: Doing Rural Development Differently,”¹⁸ a chapter included in “Investing in Rural Prosperity.” She recently retired as executive director for the Community Strategies Group, an arm of the Aspen Institute that focuses on rural America.

Doing rural development differently, she wrote, means “tailoring economic and community development efforts to the local context by understanding a community’s assets – its ‘starting point’ – and learning how best to connect and leverage those assets to meet and create progressively greater opportunity over time.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Topolsky, Janet. “Turning Points: Doing Rural Development Differently,” *Investing in Rural Prosperity*. <https://www.stlouisfed.org/-/media/project/frbstl/stlouisfed/files/pdfs/community-development/investing-rural/chapters/chapter10.pdf>

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

According to Topolsky and the Community Strategies Group, each rural place, economy and community has a different variety and volume of these eight assets:

- 1 **Individual:** Skills, understanding, physical health and mental wellness of a region's people
- 2 **Intellectual:** Knowledge, resourcefulness, creativity and innovation in a region's people, institutions, organizations and sectors
- 3 **Social:** Trust, relationships and networks
- 4 **Cultural:** Traditions, customs, ways of doing things, and world views
- 5 **Natural:** Natural resources; e.g., water, land, air, plants and animals
- 6 **Built:** Constructed infrastructure; e.g., buildings, sewer systems, broadband, roads
- 7 **Political:** Goodwill, influence and power that people, organizations and institutions in the region can exercise in decision-making
- 8 **Financial:** Monetary resources available in the region for investment²⁰

The first seven assets, Topolsky wrote, are much more important than money, "and they have a different starting point in each place." Local analysis, engaging the full range of people in a rural place, can provide a clear picture of the starting point. Once that's done, a community is better positioned to answer these development questions:

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157-158.

- **Current ability:** What do we already know how to do or make in our place? What is keeping us from doing more of it, or doing it better?
- **Potential ability:** What else could we feasibly learn to do or make? What is keeping us from doing that?
- **Market demand:** Who in the world wants the products or services that we already – or could – make or do in our rural place?
- **Opportunity gaps:** What new connections and resources and know-how do we need to weave into our asset mix both to meet that market demand and to strengthen our rural place, people and prospects?²¹

REDUCING ISOLATION CAN REDUCE THE SENSE OF SCARCITY

Topolsky, like Forbes Gaughan, found that rural residents see deficits in their communities more readily than they do assets. "There's a sense of scarcity rather than abundance in many of these places," Topolsky said. The place may feel abundant in the community's traditions, culture and caring, but not abundant in comparison to the outer world or in how outsiders might view the town or its people.

Reducing isolation can have a profound impact on a community's sense of efficacy. The Community Strategies Group approach is to bring together people from smaller communities facing similar challenges, Topolsky said. Talking to people from other communities that successfully tackled an issue can give them confidence. "They say, Well, if they can do it, we can do it."

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 157-158.

One example played out in northern Michigan in the eastern Upper Peninsula.²² Despite having more than 16,000 square miles of natural and cultural assets, in 2004 the area was losing population. Along with a decline in mining and timber, the tourism economy was struggling. A regional nonprofit, Northern Initiatives, “realized the area had many different tourism-related businesses that could do better if they talked to each other,” Topolsky said. At that time, much tourism marketing was limited to brochures left in stands at a hotel entrance. People were territorial; businesses thought they were competing with one another.

Northern Initiatives began convening a stakeholder group composed of chambers, small firms like hotels and cafes, local tourism bureaus, artists, national and state forests and parks, and governments from throughout the five-county region. Stakeholders realized if they banded together, they could afford to be part of Michigan’s Pure Michigan tourism program, something none could afford on its own. Over time, the area branded itself The Great Waters, developed three trails tourists could follow over a block of days, launched a website with extensive visitor information, and conducted social

media campaigns. Despite economic downturns at the time, the area’s tourism revenues stabilized or grew, and jobs were retained and created.

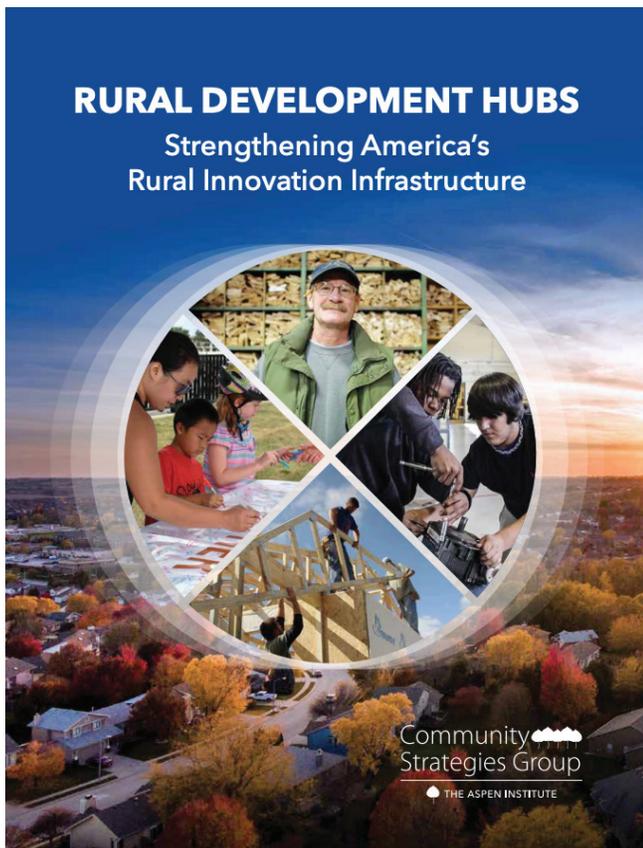
RURAL DEVELOPMENT HUBS CAN BE THE SWISS ARMY KNIVES OF REGIONS

Rural development hubs like Northern Initiatives can play the convener role. A rural development hub can be any of many kinds of organizations, such as a community development financial institution like Northern Initiatives, or a community action agency, community college, or statewide rural organization. Rural development hubs work with locals to identify existing community assets, then connect the assets to market demand in a way that builds lasting livelihoods. If you want to know which of these (if any) plays the role of rural development hub in your area, ask yourself, which organization is helping your region act as a region? “People like funders or governments want to know, ‘Okay, what’s the silver bullet?’” Topolsky said. “In a rural area, there is no one type of organization that is the silver bullet. You need a Swiss army knife organization that has multiple abilities.”



²² *Come on UP: The Great Waters fine!* Wealthworks. <https://www.wealthworks.org/success-stories/upper-peninsula-tourism/>

The Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum in Paradise, Michigan, was one of the area’s underutilized treasures. Image courtesy Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society.



Community foundations, Topolsky said, often have the capacity to be the most flexible institution in a rural area and can be powerful rural development hubs. “They have a wider range or set of tools they can legally use – if they want to.” She pointed to the Nebraska Community Foundation, which is using a different model than most statewide community foundations. Instead of building an endowed fund to benefit the whole state, the Nebraska Community Foundation is working with Nebraska communities to help them build their own funds and use them to improve their community and economy as they choose.

One small town, Red Cloud, used its funds to encourage tourists to stay overnight. The project has transformed the town.

RESOURCES

WealthWorks

wealthworks

WealthWorks offers a systematic approach that identifies opportunities in a region and engages partners in turning those opportunities into results that both build and capture wealth. It can complement or incorporate traditional economic development methods but intentionally focuses on creating more value that becomes rooted in local people, places and firms. WealthWorks is self-organizing and led by a group of regional hubs and national partners, including Aspen CSG, the National Association of Development Organizations, and the Rural Community Assistance Partnership.

<https://www.wealthworks.org/>

Rural Development Hubs: Strengthening America's Rural Innovation Infrastructure

Since 1985, the Aspen Institute's Community Strategies Group (CSG) helped connect, equip and inspire local leaders as they build more prosperous regions, with more than 75% of that work in rural America. CSG found that intermediary organizations – groups that act as connectors – are key. A subset of intermediaries, what they call Rural Development Hubs, are the main players advancing an asset-based, wealth-building approach to rural community and economic development. Among the contents: 10 routes to a stronger rural development ecosystem that policymakers, public, private and philanthropic investors can act on now.

<https://www.aspenicsg.org/rural-development-hubs-report/>

Small towns build and deploy their own philanthropic funds

For decades, the population in Nebraska and much of the rural Midwest was dwindling. The narrative was, the last one to leave, turn out the lights, Jeff Yost said. “Then COVID did in 20 months what I tried to do for 20 years, which was provide proof of concept for remote work.” The rise of remote work shifted the community economic development question from jobs to quality of life. “From a rural revitalization standpoint,” he said, “that’s huge.”

Yost graduated from Red Cloud High School in 1986, at the height of the farm crisis. Small towns like Red Cloud, Nebraska, were devastated by low commodity prices, high debt, and plunging land values. Rural banks failed, local businesses closed, and farmers lost their farms to foreclosure.²³ Like most of his 22 classmates, Yost moved away, but he only made it as far as Lincoln. He stayed connected to family in his hometown.

Today, as the president and CEO of the Nebraska Community Foundation,²⁴ Yost is helping Red Cloud and other Nebraska towns prosper. The foundation was launched in 1994, with Yost as the first full-time employee in 1998. He found that most community foundations are donor-centric, with wealthy individuals making decisions that affect communities. “It didn’t make sense to me,” he said, to reinforce class systems that grate on people. “It makes people

feel that they have less power,” he said. “Anytime people feel less and less powerful, they have more and more grievances.”



Jeff Yost, president and CEO of the Nebraska Community Foundation

²³ “Farm Bust of the 1980s,” Wessels Living History Farm, York, Nebraska. <https://livinghistoryfarm.org/farming-in-the-70s/making-money/farm-bust-of-the-1980s/>

²⁴ Nebraska Community Foundation home page. <https://www.nebcommfound.org/>

CAPITAL FLOWS TO OPTIMISM AND CONFIDENCE

Trained as an economist, Yost has seen that capital flows to optimism and confidence. The Nebraska Community Foundation is not a relief organization, he said, it's a development organization. "We're helping people focus five, 10, 20 years from now, to create the place they want to be a part of, a place their kids want to be part of."



The Nebraska Community Foundation works with its community-based affiliated funds (CBAFs) to create unrestricted endowments that communities can use as they see fit. These unrestricted endowments aren't designated for any specific use, and the principal remains untouched. Communities raise their own money through challenge grants, donations and legacy gifts. The fund grows with every gift, and so does the annual payout. An advisory committee of community volunteers has the freedom to spend that money in a way that fits their mission.

MUTUAL EMPOWERMENT: COMMUNITIES DEFINE "COMMUNITY" FOR THEMSELVES

A community must ask to become part of the network of affiliated funds. That's by design. "We only want to have partnerships with other people that are willing partners," Yost said. "It must be reciprocal. It must be mutually beneficial." The foundation is now working with about 270 places around Nebraska.

The first question the foundation asks of a potential affiliate is, how do you want to define "community"? Some affiliated funds focus on one town, others include every town in a county or school district, or multiple counties. The choice is theirs. The intent is to share power. "The best collaborations are built by mutually powerful participants," Yost said.

As of July 2025, unrestricted endowments held by CBAFs totaled \$79 million, twice the amount from five years earlier. Fifty-three CBAFs paid out at least \$10,000 a year, and 22 paid out at least \$50,000 a year.²⁵ "Now there is a fair amount of money in the system to be able to help communities grease the wheels, so it's not just a conversation," Yost said, "it's a conversation people can do something about."

RED CLOUD FUNDS STUDY OF HERITAGE TOURISM

That is certainly true in Red Cloud, the hometown of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Willa Cather. Ashley Olson grew up in Red Cloud. "It seemed like each time I came home, the buildings on Main Street had gotten a little more dilapidated," she said. "With each passing year, the community looked more and more sad." In 2008, Olson joined the staff of the National Willa Cather Center, where she is now executive director.

Initially, she remembers, the Red Cloud CBAF made small grants for a lot of different initiatives, things like playground equipment. "Right after 2010, its 15th anniversary, the group started to think about more strategic investments," Olson said. In 2012, residents participated in a visioning session facilitated by the Nebraska Community Foundation. After that,

²⁵ "Unrestricted endowments prepare Greater Nebraska for the future," Jeff Yost, *Norfolk Daily News*, April 11, 2024. <https://www.nbc-mfound.org/news/jeff-yost-unrestricted-endowments-prepare-greater-nebraska-for-the-future/>



Ashley Olson, executive director, National Willa Cather Center

community members used the session results to set two priorities: heritage tourism and quality childcare.²⁶

Red Cloud faced one problem familiar to many other towns: Getting visitors to stay and spend. At least 8,000 visitors a year would journey to Red Cloud to pay homage to Cather, its most famous resident. People who loved novels like “O Pioneers!” or “My Ántonia” felt pulled to the town on the prairie. Six of Cather’s 12 novels are set in Red Cloud, and 22 nationally designated historic buildings and sites related to Cather are in or near Red Cloud. Given all this, you would think Cather fans would want to hang out, maybe grab lunch. Prior to 2015, though, most visitors didn’t spend the night or even have a meal.

²⁶ “Red Cloud proves small-town success doesn’t just happen,” *Nebraska Community Foundation*, June 20, 2017. <https://www.nebcommfound.org/news/red-cloud-proves-small-town-success-doesnt-just-happen/>



The J.L. Miner House, Italianate style built in 1878, was home to Willa Cather’s playmates in Red Cloud. It was featured as the Harling House in My Ántonia.

The Red Cloud CBAF underwrote an economic development study of heritage tourism in 2013.²⁷ The study found that, with more activities, dining and lodging options, the town could reap \$3.5 million of new economic activity by drawing more visitors for longer stays. Since 2015, local funders have underwritten the salary of a heritage tourism development director, 41 new businesses have started, and city sales tax receipts have jumped 56%.²⁸ The Hotel Garber, a 27-room boutique hotel in a historic building downtown, opened in 2025.

²⁷ “My Hometown has Reimagined its Future,” *Jeff Yost*, December 2024, page 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, page 2.



The Hotel Garber. Photo by Provident Promotions, provided courtesy of the National Willa Cather Center.

RED CLOUD'S INVESTMENT DRIVES OUTSIDE INVESTMENTS

Red Cloud hasn't done it alone. As the community invested, the National Willa Cather Center invested in the community. Olson's educational background was finance and accounting. When she joined the Cather Center, the organization was in a tough financial situation, but it had aspirations. "I was excited by the foundation's plans to rehabilitate a building downtown into a museum and archive, along with retail spaces." During Olson's tenure, the Cather Center's assets have grown by more than \$13 million.²⁹

Yost encourages Nebraska communities to embrace entrepreneurship as their primary economic strategy. That's especially important with tourism, where visitors want an authentic local experience. "Communities themselves need to understand, love and appreciate the goodness they have," Yost said, "and then they're in a much better position to share it with others."

One region that accomplished this is southwest Virginia, where 19 counties worked together to create a new byway built on a vital part of their heritage.

²⁹ <https://www.willacather.org/profile/staff/ashley-olson>



The byway that bluegrass built

When railroad officials pounded in the golden spike in the Utah Territory in 1869, their action did more than complete the first transcontinental railroad. It also launched the Second Industrial Revolution.³⁰ Railroad lines bloomed throughout the country, including in southwest Virginia. Trains hauled coal from the Virginia coalfields, deep in the Appalachian Mountains, to northern steel mills.³¹

By late in the 20th century, while total U.S. coal production increased, Virginia's share was dropping. Western mines had thicker coal seams that could be mined using surface mines. Surface mines are much less costly than the underground mines needed to gain access to the thin seams in Appalachia.

Virginia reached peak coal production in 1990, when it produced more than 46.5 million tons of coal. After that, both coal prices and coal production declined. Throughout the 1990s, coalfield counties had some of Virginia's highest unemployment rates.³²

Mining had gone through boom-and-bust cycles before, but this bust felt permanent. Economic survival depended on adjusting to the new reality.

³⁰ "The Second Industrial Revolution, 1870-1914," U.S. History Scene, <https://ushistoryscene.com/article/second-industrial-revolution/>

³¹ "Virginia's Coal Towns," The Library of Virginia, Exhibitions. <https://old.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/coaltown/fields/>

³² "Virginia Coal," Virginia Tech, Virginia Energy Patterns and Trends, <https://vept.energy.vt.edu/coal.html#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20is%20among%20the,Virginia%20mines'%20major%20market%20competitors.>



"Virginia's Coal Towns," an exhibition at The Library of Virginia, originally displayed April 2-October 27, 2001. https://old.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/coaltown/fields/fields_img.htm

One idea came from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development. *What about a heritage music trail?*

“Everybody said, well, yeah, we love that,” Kevin Byrd said. Southwest Virginia had some significant heritage music venues and was peppered with towns with community concerts and informal picking sessions, as well. Old-time music was a source of local pride. And focusing on the creative economy meant the area would be less reliant on the limited resources of land, labor and capital.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS SERVED AS CONVENERS



Kevin Byrd, executive director, New River Valley Regional Commission

To go from an idea that everyone liked to a 19-county, 333-mile economic driver required a lot of meetings, planning and collaboration. Byrd is executive director of the New River Valley Regional Commission, one of four regional development organizations (RDOs) that serve as conveners for the effort. He is also the author of “Breaking Down Friday Night Rivalries: Strengthening Regional Governance Structures to

Facilitate Collaboration,”³³ a chapter in “Investing in Rural Prosperity.”

RDOs, like community foundations, exist around the U.S. – more than 500 at current count – and can play the role of rural development hubs.

RESOURCE

National map of regional development organizations (RDOs)

NADO, the National Association of Development Organizations, represents the national network of more than 500 RDOs across the country. RDOs are multi-jurisdictional, quasi-governmental organizations that provide regional planning and local community and economic development services.

Many RDOs help provide the services and resources needed within underserved and rural communities. RDOs also administer a variety of federal, state, and local funds. To find out which RDO, if any, serves your region, use the link below.

<https://www.nado.org/member-map/>

Today, the Crooked Road – Virginia’s Heritage Music Trail³⁴ – connects nine major venues and more than 60 affiliated venues and festivals that preserve and promote traditional Appalachian old-time and bluegrass music³⁵ in southwest Virginia.

³³ Byrd, Kevin. “Breaking Down Friday Night Rivalries: Strengthening Regional Governance Structures to Facilitate Collaboration,” *Investing in Rural Prosperity: Chapter 19*. <https://www.stlouisfed.org/-/media/project/frbstl/stlouisfed/files/pdfs/community-development/investing-rural/chapters/chapter19.pdf>

³⁴ This is *The Crooked Road: A Place of Beauty – A Place of Song*. <https://thecrookedroadva.com/>

³⁵ The video explains the origins of the heritage music trail in southwest Virginia. https://youtu.be/Vf_ng_tZgdy?si=UkslZuL39WcdIRiV



Dancers at the Floyd Country Store at the Friday Night Jamboree.

path and artisans along a music trail, contributed to transforming the broad vision into a cohesive whole.

After Crooked Road, the same group created 'Round the Mountain: Southwest Virginia's Artisan Network.'³⁶

³⁶ *Round the Mountain: Southwest Virginia's Artisan Network.*
<https://roundthemountain.org/>

All 19 counties have artisan trails, based on the Crooked Road model. The network uses juried membership, where the artist submits a portfolio for review by a panel of experts, as well as training and regional events to connect skilled artisans with audiences seeking locally made goods.

COUNTIES HAD FLEXIBILITY TO CONNECT BASED ON THEIR OWN ASSETS

The New River Valley Regional Commission territory includes four of the 19 counties that are part of the Crooked Road territory: Floyd, Giles, Montgomery and Pulaski run north to south near the eastern edge of the territory.

“In Floyd County, we have the Floyd Country Store,” Byrd said, “and every Friday night it has the Jamboree.” After an hour of gospel music, workers clear out the chairs, the band comes in and people dance. At the set break, an emcee pulls down a map and figures out who traveled the farthest to attend. “Every given Friday night in a town of 500 people in a county of 16,000,” Byrd said, “you have people

who are speaking foreign languages because they came to experience Appalachian culture.”

For Giles County, music wasn’t the major value proposition. Its tagline is “Virginia’s mountain playground.” According to Byrd, leaders in Giles County knew they had to go all in on whatever assets they have, given the loss of the county’s coal-fired plant and supplier firms that once manufactured equipment for coal mines.

“Outdoor recreation is big for them,” Byrd said. Giles County is home to 37 miles of the New River and New River Water Trail, and more than 50 miles of the Appalachian Trail and the Great Eastern Trail.³⁷ Its outfitters are frontline economic developers, Byrd said. “We have story after story of an outfitter telling a visitor, you should think about moving your business here, and then they end up doing that.”

³⁷ Giles County: Virginia’s Mountain Playground.
<https://virginiasmtnplayground.com/>



A NEW NONPROFIT CARRIES THE TUNE

State and RDO involvement helped launch Crooked Road and ‘Round the Mountain, then that involvement moved to the background. The region formed a new nonprofit, the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation and Friends of Southwest Virginia. “You always need to have the artisan, the music venue, the cycling community, whatever it is,” Byrd said. “They need to feel ultimate ownership of this cause.” It is also important, he said, that the influence of the government, nonprofit and business communities stay in balance.

The Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation and Friends of Southwest Virginia 2024 annual report shows that these investments in the creative

economy are paying off.³⁸ Travel expenditures in southwest Virginia rose from \$648.9 million in 2004 to \$1.3 billion in 2023. Local economies benefited from tourism-related tax revenues that hit \$62.9 million in 2023. They also benefited from the region’s 12,092 tourism-related jobs.

When Byrd talks with new RDO directors about how to identify opportunities, he talks about convening. “If you’re convening leaders, then you’re going to be seen as a relevant organization,” Byrd said. “Then you have to listen to what’s happening in the room and support those opportunities.” Convening people, helping them navigate a process, is complicated. “As an RDO, we’re a trusted agent in that we are going to convene people in the appropriate way.”

³⁸ “2024 Annual Report,” Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation and Friends of Southwest Virginia, p 14. <https://friendsofswva.org/about/annualreport/>

Blue Ridge Music Center located along the Blue Ridge Parkway in Galax, VA.



Destination marketing organizations help byways build (and sell) the visitor experience

Just as long-time residents may struggle to see what might draw a visitor to their town, they also may not realize what visitors need once they arrive. That is where a destination marketing organization (DMO) comes in. Also called a tourism board or a convention and visitors bureau, a DMO promotes specific attractions to potential visitors.



Sharon Strouse, executive director, National Scenic Byway Association

A DMO doesn't convene. That's the job of the rural development hub. A DMO doesn't *create* attractions. Rather, the DMO's role is to identify for a community, if you have this attraction, here is what you need to best serve your visitors. A DMO may be an independent nonprofit or chamber of commerce that works throughout a region. DMOs can be valuable resources for byways.

"How many local rural byways aren't even friends with their regional DMOs?" Sharon Strouse wondered. Those are missed opportunities, in her view. "Regionally, somebody is paid to tell people what you are and what's special about you." Strouse is executive director of the National Scenic Byway Association,³⁹ a member-driven nonprofit that provides training for state byway coordinators and leaders. The foundation also provides advocacy and anyone can join. The organization offers resources for travelers, including an interactive map of byways in each state.⁴⁰ Strouse is an emeritus

³⁹ National Scenic Byway Association. <https://nsbfoundation.com/>

⁴⁰ Explore Scenic Drives - Byways Maps by State. <https://nsbfoundation.com/travel-byways/> shows the byways designated at the state and national level, with links to more information about each.

professor with Ohio State University Extension, Community Development, and she leads the Amish Country Byway.⁴¹

“DMOs should have a handle on what the visitor needs,” Strouse said. They can tell you that there isn’t a local restaurant open on Sundays, or that you need a place for visitors to walk their dogs. “Visitors must have bathrooms,” she said. “A resident won’t realize there’s not a public bathroom for 30 miles, but the DMO should.”

Some DMOs are slow to see a byway as a tourism product. They’re used to thinking in terms of destinations, like a theme park, sporting event or festival. And these destinations often pay the DMO to promote the product. “A byway is a destination product,” Strouse said. When a DMO partners with communities along a byway, the DMO can help build economic development across a region rather than in just one town or city. It’s an opportunity, Strouse said, “to lay out that map and then think about the people out there that are seeking the scenic experience.”

⁴¹ Amish Country Byway. <https://nsbfoundation.com/sb/amish-country-byway/>

Based on her work with byways around the U.S., Strouse offers advice on protecting the resource, and on providing hospitality and connectivity, and the three things byway visitors want.

BALANCE CONSERVATION WITH PROMOTION

Before diving into creating and promoting a byway, Strouse has a word of caution. “The biggest thing to understand, especially with rural byways and rural communities,” she said, “is that it’s important to balance protecting the resource with marketing or promoting the resource.”

That takes preparation and attention.

When a byway is first designated, sometimes people want to leap into marketing, jumping over essential tasks like getting signage in place, stories ready to share, and a fail-safe visitor experience. Preparation helps assure that the resource – the land, the culture, the community – will benefit rather than suffer from tourism.



Strouse leads a training session for leaders of byways.

Even long-time byways can be taken by surprise. “How do you manage trash if you have too many people?” Strouse said. “I can tell you horror stories from during COVID along Colorado’s byways. That’s one of the problems they had when they got overrun.”

Towns with natural amenities, the kinds of places with strong tourist economies and a lot of second homes or investment properties, face more competition for resources. They should pay especially close attention to balancing local and visitor needs.⁴²



The Ocoee Scenic Byway is a winner of the National Scenic Byway Association’s 2021 Byway Community Award for their clean-up events series, “Nobody Trashes Tennessee” and “Keep the Tennessee River Beautiful.”

RESOURCES

The PA Wilds Design Guide for Community Character Stewardship

The mission of the PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship is to integrate conservation & economic development in a way that strengthens communities of the Pennsylvania Wilds. After being dramatically logged over at the turn of the century, 100 years of conservation and sustainable forestry practices have restored the PA Wilds to what it is today. The natural assets and the community character of the region’s small towns and cities make it a destination for visitors.

⁴² “Far from vacation homes, small town Airbnbs house traveling workforces,” Marketplace, Sept. 12, 2023. <https://www.marketplace.org/story/2023/09/12/far-from-vacation-homes-small-town-airbnbs-house-traveling-workforces>

The PA Wilds Design Guide for Community Character Stewardship is a voluntary planning document that highlights how communities can protect or enhance their unique community character as they grow – whether that growth is due to tourism, other economic development planning, resource extraction or other industries.

<https://www.pawildscenter.org/programs-and-services/community-character-stewardship/>

GETAWAY

Getaway is a podcast series about rural America’s recreation economies. Outdoor recreation contributes 1.2 billion dollars to the U.S. economy — and depends on small towns surrounded by public land. A Daily Yonder⁴³ reporter looks at communities around the U.S. that are all focused on their recreation economy. The podcast is a part of Rural Remix (“your source for a deeper, richer story about life in rural places.”) It is a co-production of the Daily Yonder and the Rural Assembly, both projects of the nonprofit Center for Rural Strategies.

<https://dailyyonder.com/podcasts/rural-remix/getaway/>

DOES YOUR TOWN REALLY WANT VISITORS? HOSPITALITY MATTERS.

Some towns just want to be left alone. If that describes the culture in your town, you will need to engage residents if you hope to cultivate the community as a place that’s welcoming to visitors. “If you don’t have that welcoming attitude,” Strouse said, “even if visitors come the first time, they’re not going to come again.”

⁴³ The Daily Yonder: Keep It Rural. <https://dailyyonder.com/>

HARNESS THE POWER OF CONNECTIVITY

On a byway, every diner, gift shop, museum and outfitter, is a potential connector, although many act as if they are not. If your website only refers to your business, it functions as a hard stop. “A store owner will say, I don’t want to tell everybody else about what’s out there, I just want to talk about my place,” Strouse said. “That means nobody is ever going to find you.” Instead, if you’re on a byway, say so. Strouse suggests linking to Travel Byways.⁴⁴ Include a map and show where everything else is within a 20-mile radius. Refer people to partners who, in turn, will share your story.

RESOURCE

Embeddable maps for almost every byway

The National Scenic Byway Association offers an interactive U.S. map with state and byway-level maps that DMOs or others can embed on their own websites. Click on your state for maps that include those designated America’s Byways, as well as state scenic byways and other scenic drives. Below the U.S. map, the site includes state-by-state lists and links to information about designated America’s Byways as well as designated state byways.

<https://nsbfoundation.com/travel-byways/>

A toolbox of resources for people starting or building a byway

The National Scenic Byway Association offers a resource library that includes fact sheets, case studies, leadership training materials, and publications on things like

byway interpretation, marketing and wayfinding and roadside improvements.

<https://nsbfoundation.com/byway-resource-library/>

THREE THINGS VISITORS WANT

Visitor surveys and the experience of byways coordinators involved in the National Scenic Byway Association tell us that byway organizers should provide visitors with three things:

1 Plenty of visitor information, including maps.

Sometimes people stumble on a byway and need to learn about it while in motion. “They only have their handheld device,” Strouse said, “so your website must function as a window for them to get information” on things like the route, the itinerary, the byway’s story and more.

2 Scenic views. You don’t have to be scenic to be a byway, but travelers expect scenic views. Strouse and others encourage towns to prohibit billboards.

3 A focus on what makes it authentic. For an enhanced visitor experience, Strouse said, it’s important for a community to focus on what makes it authentic. “If you tell me your byway has all six intrinsic qualities, I feel like you have nothing,” she said. “You have to focus on what makes you authentic.” Visitors often want to eat locally. They want museums and visitor centers to share the story, so they understand why the byway exists and why it’s important.

Armed with an understanding of what a byway is, the roles of rural development hubs and destination marketing organizations in building them, and with a sprinkling of advice on the basics, let’s hop in the (metaphorical) Camaro and explore Route 66.

⁴⁴ *Travel Byways shows scenic drives and byways in every state.*
<https://nsbfoundation.com/travel-byways/>

Route 66 an epic, quirky trip into America's past

The stocky man was a quiver with excitement as he darted around the feet of the 22-foot-tall Texaco giant outside Gearhead Curios in Galena, Kansas, just a few miles from the Oklahoma border. The man was 40-something, but it was easy to picture him as the boy he once was. The only thing brighter than his smile was his sunburned face. The man's wife, taller and thinner, hung back.

"Where you from?" he asked me. There are two questions tourists ask each other when they meet on Route 66. That's one of them. He said they were from Miami, Florida. Then he asked, "Would you take our picture?" And that's the other one.

Afterwards, we all headed around the corner to the front of the station. The man gestured to an old Hudson sedan tricked out with "Cars" googly eyes as if to say, "Can you believe how cool this is?"

Gearhead Curios occupies a restored Texaco filling station constructed out of native stone in 1939.

Later that day, I saw them walking as I drove down Main Street in Miami, Oklahoma. "Hey, Florida!" They waved. I waved back. I hoped I would run into them again along the route, but it was not to be.

Keep in mind that a road trip on Route 66 means driving a road that no longer exists officially. This introduces a level of wayfinding complexity best managed by a guidebook or an app or both.⁴⁵ It's not that traveling Route 66 is difficult, it's that traveling Route 66 is not *easy*. You don't drive Route 66 on

⁴⁵ Experienced Route 66 travelers on social media recommend the *EZ66 Guide for Travelers* by Jerry McClanahan, in paper format, and an app called *Route 66 Navigation*, nicknamed the *Yellow App*.

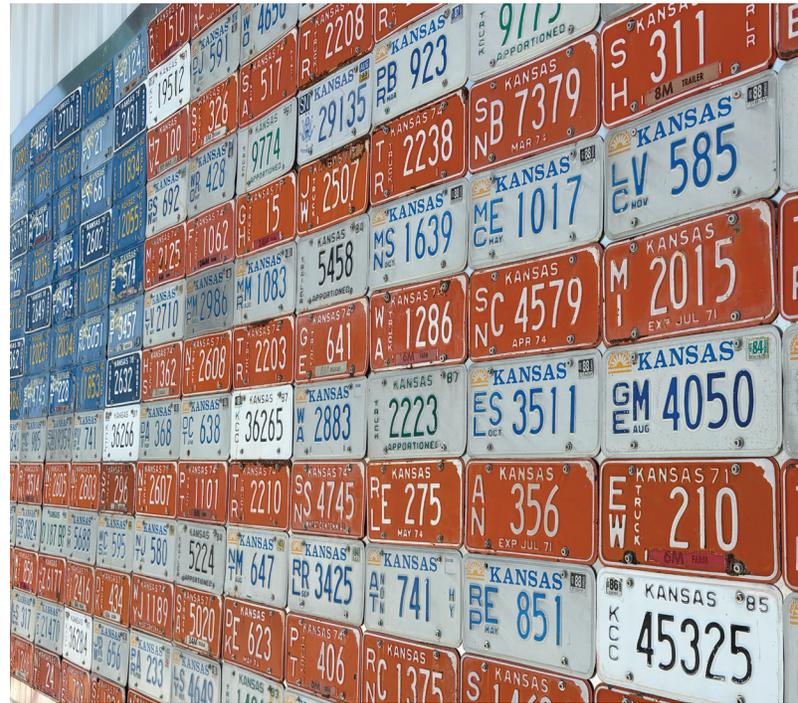




autopilot. Where the interstate is a big thick straight line with lots of signage, Route 66 has jogs and turns and signage is optional. Some states do a decent job of hanging Route 66 signs and painting the shield on the roadway, but still, pay attention. Navigating is half the fun.

Carefully following the app I drove from Miami to Sayre and back, across the breadth of the state. I interviewed Oklahomans who were preserving history, building businesses and strengthening community along Route 66.

What struck me, when I talked to these folks, was their joy.



A map made of Kansas license plates fills one wall of the Gearhead Curios station.

“Big A,” the Texaco Giant, was dedicated in 2024 at Gearhead Curios.

To understand why people care about Route 66, start with the history

Billed as the “shortest, best and most scenic route” from Chicago to Los Angeles, Route 66 was a shining ribbon of possibility during some of the most daunting and vivid decades in American history.

When Route 66 was born in 1926, Model T Fords roamed the Earth, gas was 22 cents a gallon, and the economy roared. Three years later, the bottom fell out. A combination of economic issues, such as a stock market crash and overproduction of crops during World War I, led to the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Farmers had plowed so much of the prairie, when a drought hit in 1930, there was no grass or crops to hold down the topsoil. The drought held on, year after year. Dirt blew from the Dust Bowl⁴⁶ on the Great Plains all the way to the East Coast. In Oklahoma, the Panhandle was hardest hit. Animals starved and farmers lost their farms.⁴⁷ Some managed to tough it out while others had had enough.

THE ALLURING POSSIBILITY OF A BETTER LIFE OUT WEST

Dust Bowl refugees packed up and headed for the West, most often California, on Route 66. The term “Okie” came to mean any poverty-stricken migrant

⁴⁶ “Dust Bowl,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, Oklahoma Historical Society. <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=DU011>

⁴⁷ Read “The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl,” by Timothy Egan for a compelling, claustrophobic telling of what it was like to survive the blinding black dust blizzards.



Lange, D., photographer. (1936) People living in miserable poverty, Elm Grove, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma. Oklahoma County United States Oklahoma Elm Grove, 1936. Aug. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017768076>.

from the Southwest (Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas). When we think of these migrants we hear Woody Guthrie’s folk songs, we see the photographs of Dorothea Lange, and then of course there is John Steinbeck’s novel, “The Grapes of Wrath.”⁴⁸

“66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership, from the desert’s slow northward invasion, from the twisting winds that howl up out of Texas, from the floods that bring no richness to the land and steal what little richness is there. From all of these the people are in flight, and they come into 66 from the tributary side roads, from the wagon tracks and the rutted country roads. 66 is the mother road, the road of flight.”⁴⁹

When you drive the narrow, two-lane sections of Route 66 west of Oklahoma City, under the biggest sky you’ve ever seen, you feel that history alongside you.

TROOPS AND MATERIEL TRAVEL ROUTE 66 DURING WWII

⁴⁸ “Okie Migrations,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, Oklahoma Historical Society. <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=OK008>

⁴⁹ Goodreads, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7555263-66-is-the-path-of-a-people-in-flight-refugees>

In the 1940s, Route 66 became a lifeline for the war effort. Part of the Strategic Highway Network, it played a major role in mobilizing troops and supplies. In Oklahoma, the town of Miami welcomed more than 2,100 British cadets and did their best to make the young men feel at home. Miami was the site of one of five flying cadet schools operated in the U.S. to train British civilian pilots. Fifteen British cadets died in training accidents and are buried in a section of Miami’s G.A.R. Cemetery.⁵⁰

FINALLY, IT’S VACATION TIME, AND ROUTE 66 BECKONS

When the war ended, men and women came home from overseas. Americans had been through two World Wars and a Great Depression in just 30 years. They craved a vacation, and Route 66 was ready. Car culture was revving up. Cars grew fins! And chrome! And fancy paint jobs!⁵¹ Bobby Troup wrote “Get Your Kicks on Route 66” in 1946, Nat King Cole recorded it, and Americans lived it.

⁵⁰ G.A.R. Cemetery, “British Flyers History.” <https://garcemeterymiamiok.com/galleries/british-flyers-ceremonies/>

⁵¹ *Ideal Classic Cars*, <https://www.idealclassiccars.net/blog/an-over-view-of-the-1950s-iconic-car-culture>



Near El Reno, Oklahoma. Image courtesy the Oklahoma Historical Society.



HIGHWAY 66 WEST — OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA

Image courtesy the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Mom-and-pop businesses along Route 66 knew to entice a family off the highway, they better offer something big, something weird, or something bright. The first Muffler Men – also called giants or titans – lumbered onto Route 66 in the 1960s. Some motels took the shape of wigwams. And neon beckoned from the dark, blinking, “Stop here! Stop here! Stop here!”

ROUTE 66 IS DECOMMISSIONED, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Then President Dwight Eisenhower launched the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways in 1956. Starting that year, the Federal Highway Administration replaced Route 66 with five interstates, which meant what had been a flood of

cars was now a trickle. In 1985, Route 66 was decommissioned and all signs removed.

Decommissioning appeared to be a death knell for towns along Route 66, and for some it was. But the network of business owners, towns and cities, and other advocates that promoted Route 66 in its heyday kicked in. By 1990, most of the eight states along Route 66 had launched their own Route 66 associations.

Also in 1990, Congress passed the Route 66 Study Act, calling for the National Park Service to evaluate the historical significance of Route 66. The study found that Route 66 is of national historic significance as a symbol of our transportation history.

The year had one more gift to give, the publication of “Route 66: The Mother Road” by Michael Wallis. What Wallis called “a love letter to the highway” sold more than a million copies and drew travelers back onto the Mother Road. While the book shared the byway’s history and the attractions, perhaps its greatest contribution was interviews with people who *made* the history and *built* the attractions, many still working hard to keep them alive.

Famously, the book was the inspiration for the 2006 Pixar Animation Studios movie “Cars.” Wallis led eleven Pixar animators in rented white Cadillacs on two different road trips across Route 66 to conduct research.⁵² He also provided the voice of the Sheriff in the animated film. Wallis lives in Tulsa and was the first inductee into the Oklahoma Route 66 Hall of Fame⁵³ in 1994. An edition of “Route 66: The Mother Road” marking the byway’s centennial is scheduled for release in May 2026.

STUDY SHOWS THE LASTING ECONOMIC IMPACT OF ROUTE 66

One of the most extensive studies of the economic impact of any byway focused on Route 66.

In 2008, the World Monuments Fund listed Route 66 on its World Monument Watch, “to draw attention to the complex challenge of preserving not only an iconic cultural landscape, but a historic American experience.”⁵⁴ The Fund joined with the National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program, with support from American Express, to sponsor an economic impact study. Professor David Listokin

⁵² “Cars (film),” Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cars_\(film\)#cite_note-pixarclinton-15](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cars_(film)#cite_note-pixarclinton-15)

⁵³ Oklahoma Route 66 Hall of Fame, Oklahoma Route 66 Association. <https://oklahomaroute66.com/hall-of-fame>

⁵⁴ “Route 66 Economic Impact Study: Synthesis of Findings, Rutgers University, 2011, page 7. https://kansascityfed.org/documents/11010/48_Route206620Economic20Impact20StudyE28094_Synthesis_2024-11-22-171213_ycpl.pdf

of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, directed the study, published in 2011.

“When I first started studying this, I said it’s quite amazing,” Listokin said. “Why are people shipping motorcycles from Europe to do the route? It’s because it’s America the way it used to be. I know of nothing else like this draw.”

Listokin’s team from Rutgers used an intercept survey, with kiosks and such along the road, to gather data and observations from about 4,200 travelers.⁵⁵ Their findings included:

- More than 85% of Route 66 travelers visit historic places and museums. A conservative estimate of annual expenditure by all Route 66 travelers in the U.S. is \$38 million. (The estimate is considered especially conservative because the study was conducted during the Great Recession.)



David Listokin, professor, Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, page 9.

- Heritage preservation, through Main Street revitalization programs and museums, adds another \$94 million in annual investments.
- The national impact is an annual gain of 2,400 jobs, \$90 million in income, \$262 million in overall output, \$127 million in gross domestic product and \$37 million in tax revenues.
- Tourism, they found, is often the most important or only economic engine for many towns along the route, and Route 66-themed motels, restaurants and shops anchor the downtowns of many small communities.⁵⁶

Route 66 travelers in 2009 were overwhelmingly (97%) White in race, middle-aged (median of 55 years), typically well-educated and generally middle income. To reach other audiences, Listokin said, “We must think strategically about whose story has not been fully told. We need to expand the lens of who are the people that have been connected to Route 66.”

Baby Boomers were the last generation to experience Route 66 before it was decommissioned in 1985. The pull of nostalgia is weakening, which opens space for different kinds of storytelling. “We’re getting further from the people who were on the old Route 66,” Listokin said, “but people who have traveled more in a contemporary time have their own experiences.”

RESOURCE

The Rutgers University studies are the foundation of what has happened since on Route 66 and paved the way for increased investment in the Mother Road.

⁵⁶ *Route 66: The Road Ahead, report from a strategic roundtable, World Monuments Fund, 2013.* https://kansascityfed.org/documents/11014/82_Route206620roundtable20report20final-low_2024-11-22-171217_lacm.pdf

They also offer useful information for other byways. The studies were conducted in collaboration with the National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program and World Monuments Fund.

Here is what is included in each report:

- **ROUTE 66 ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY: SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS.**

Released June 2011. Rutgers analyzed Route 66 with a focus on its historic preservation, economic landscape, and heritage tourism. The study included a national survey of travelers along Route 66, mapping of the Route 66 corridor in Geographic Information Systems form, survey of 25 Main Street programs and 33 museums, 25 in-depth case studies of Route 66 sites, and implementation of input-output models to quantify the economic contribution of Route 66. The synthesis summarizes major study findings.

https://kansascityfed.org/documents/11010/48_Route206620Economic20Impact20StudyE28094_Synthesis_2024-11-22-171213_ycpl.pdf

- **ROUTE 66 ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY: TECHNICAL REPORT, VOLUME 1. HISTORY, CHARACTERISTICS, AND ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS.**

<https://kansascityfed.org/documents/11012/route-66-economic-impact-study-v1.pdf>

- **ROUTE 66 ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY: TECHNICAL REPORT, VOLUME II. TALES FROM THE MOTHER ROAD: Case Studies of the People and Places of Route 66.**

https://kansascityfed.org/documents/11011/46_Route206620Economic20Impact20StudyE28094_Volume20II_2024-11-22-171208_anqi.pdf

- **ROUTE 66, REVISITED. CONDUCTED IN COLLABORATION WITH ROUTE 66: THE ROAD AHEAD PARTNERSHIP.**

Released July 2022. The study includes detailed case studies of six Route 66 communities, including Tulsa, Okla., a survey of a larger number of communities on Route 66 concerning economic development, reconnaissance analysis of the market potential from households near Route 66, and an overview of economic development and other programs available to Route 66.

https://kansascityfed.org/documents/11013/RT66_Revisited_w_Users_Guide.FINALpdf-1.pdf

- **THE ROAD AHEAD REPORT: REPORT FROM A STRATEGIC ROUNDTABLE**

Held November 20-22, 2013, in Anaheim, California. The World Monuments Fund convened a series of panel discussions drawing more than 100 people representing government, business, tourism, and preservation. The group honed in on several key issues to tackle, many of which were echoed in the Kansas City Fed study.

https://kansascityfed.org/documents/11014/82_Route206620roundtable20report20final-low_2024-11-22-171217_lacm.pdf

FOLLOW-UP STUDY FINDS COMMUNITIES LEAVE MONEY ON THE TABLE

In 2022, Rutgers returned to Route 66 for a follow-up study. Listokin and his team worked with Route 66: The Road Ahead Partnership,⁵⁷ a new national organization formed with the support of the National



Yukon, Oklahoma. Image courtesy the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Park Service and the World Monuments Fund. The report⁵⁸ included case studies, surveys of Route 66 communities, and an analysis that showed market potential of about \$210 billion from nearby residents.

It also included an overview of potential economic development and other supportive programs available for Route 66, with a breakdown of programs available in each state – a resource that could be pertinent to any byway.

The follow-up study found that communities were leaving money on the table because they were not pursuing state and local funding opportunities. That is partly because the process can be complicated and time-consuming. Listokin encourages increasing the number of tax credit and grant programs available for smaller projects and with reduced set-up and fixed costs.

“There are real challenges,” Listokin said. “Do what you can. Take full advantage of what’s available. There are local things a community can do to aid Route 66 [or other byways], like tax increment financing for business improvement districts, special improvement districts, motel surtaxes. Take advantage of whatever low-hanging fruit there is.”

⁵⁷ *The Road Ahead Partnership.* <https://route66roadahead.org/>

⁵⁸ *Route 66 Revisited, Rutgers University.* See 5.1 *Route 66 Potential Economic Development (and other supportive) Programs, starting on page 464.* https://kansascityfed.org/documents/11013/RT66_Revisited_w_Users_Guide.FINALpdf-1.pdf

More miles, more love for Route 66 in Oklahoma

Nowhere is Route 66 more at home than in Oklahoma, where the pavement follows the contours of the land as though it had always been there. In Oklahoma, the West and East collide on Route 66, and the state becomes the crossroads for America's Main Street.

—Michael Wallis, *Route 66: The Mother Road*⁵⁹

Route 66 may feel at home in Oklahoma because so many Oklahomans played pivotal roles in developing, sustaining and celebrating it.

Let's start with Cyrus Avery, who spearheaded the national committee that created the U.S. Highway System in 1926. He pushed for the Chicago-to-Los Angeles route that we know today and chose "66" as the road's official number. Avery was a Tulsa businessman. It may not have been a coincidence that the new highway ran right past Avery's own filling station and restaurant.⁶⁰



Then there are Jack and Gladys Cutberth, "Mr. and Mrs. 66." They ran the National U.S. 66 Association from their basement office in Clinton during its glory years. Gladys donated their signs, artifacts and memorabilia to Clinton's Oklahoma Route 66 Museum, the first state-sponsored Route 66 museum in the nation.⁶¹

In 1989, the Oklahoma legislature recognized the need for an agency to preserve and promote Route 66 in the state. According to the Oklahoma Route 66 Association, the association was born after a meeting of concerned people from state departments like tourism, transportation and commerce, the historical society, and others. It is the only Route 66 association among the eight states that was formed by legislative action.⁶²

⁵⁹ Michael Wallis, *Route 66: The Mother Road*, St. Martin's Press, 1990, page 89.

⁶⁰ "A Traveler's Introduction to Oklahoma Route 66," Oklahoma Route 66 Association. <https://oklahomaroute66.com/ok66history>

⁶¹ "Clinton," Road Trip USA - Route 66 - Oklahoma. <https://www.roadtripusa.com/route-66/oklahoma/clinton/>

⁶² "A Traveler's Introduction to Oklahoma Route 66," Oklahoma Route 66 Association. <https://oklahomaroute66.com/ok66history>

OKLAHOMA PREPARES FOR THE ROUTE 66 CENTENNIAL IN 2026

When Oklahoma went looking for the appropriate kick-off to its months-long centennial celebration, it chose to honor Andy Payne. The Claremore Museum of History and the Cherokee Nation held the inaugural Andy Payne Route 66 Race in April 2025.

Lucky for the runners, this race did not follow the same route as the race that catapulted Andy Payne to fame back in 1928.⁶³



Andy Payne 1928. Photo courtesy of the Claremore Museum of History.

The 1928 foot race was a publicity stunt devised by a sports promoter. The race covered 3,423 miles and took 84 days from Los Angeles to Chicago on Route 66 and then on to New York's Madison Square Garden. The press dubbed it the Bunion Derby. Of 275 at the starting line, just 55 finished the race. It was the

⁶³ To view "Running Coast to Coast, Andy Payne and the 1928 Transcontinental Footrace" by Osiyo TV: https://youtu.be/tBR5zOVa8iU?si=4PdHni9pr_5ohD_u

first event that really drew the nation's attention to Route 66, a boon for business owners there.

"Andy Payne, without having any training, decided he just might be able to do this thing," Keith Austin said. Austin is a contractor with the Cherokee Nation Cultural Tourism Group and a former member of the Cherokee Nation Tribal Council. Payne, 20, was a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, the oldest of seven children and a resident of Foyil, on Route 66.

"By the time he gets to Oklahoma, Payne is the favored racer to win the race," Austin said. "He was an Oklahoma hero. The towns along the route turned out en masse, and every newspaper and radio station had reporters there, excited to tell the story. It became a true national phenomenon."

Payne won. He used the \$25,000 prize to pay off the family farm, build his parents a house, and buy some land for himself. "He used the notoriety from the race as a catapult for other endeavors in his life, and he did it masterfully," Austin said. Payne became clerk of the Oklahoma State Supreme Court, winning re-election five times. He got rich when coal, gas and oil were discovered on his land but kept working anyway. He died in 1977. In 1981, the governor declared June 6 "Andy Payne Memorial Day."⁶⁴

The Andy Payne Route 66 race in 2025 was a 5K. Organizers plan to expand the run to a half marathon and ultimately a marathon on the historic Mother Road.⁶⁵

LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR CHAMPIONS TOURISM AS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

⁶⁴ *The Claremore Museum of History and the Cherokee Nation: Andy Payne Route 66 Race.* <https://claremoremoh.org/andypayneroute66/>

⁶⁵ *Andy Payne Route 66 Race.* <https://runsignup.com/andypayneroute66>



Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin, Jr., and Lt. Gov. Matt Pinnell stand in front of a statue of Andy Payne at the 2025 Andy Payne Route 66 race.

When some 300 runners gathered at the start of the 2025 5K race, Oklahoma Lieutenant Governor Matt Pinnell was one of them. The lieutenant governor is a regular at Route 66 events. Organizers point to his involvement as key to state support.

Andrew Stone is an architect in Clinton whose design for the Hub City Gateway project received a nearly \$1 million Route 66 Revitalization Grant from Oklahoma's Route 66 Commission. "We're lucky," he said. "Our lieutenant governor has a background in marketing and he is the one promoting the idea that cultural tourism in Oklahoma needs to be the front door to economic development."

Pinnell serves as both lieutenant governor and the state's first secretary of tourism and branding. In an interview with *ROUTE* magazine,⁶⁶ Pinnell said that in Oklahoma, the role of lieutenant governor is a blank slate. Pinnell ran for lieutenant governor on a platform of tourism, to sell and market Oklahoma. He champions the promotion of Route 66, which he said plays to Oklahoma's strengths. "We have more drivable miles of the most famous road in the entire world," he said.

LEGISLATURE APPROVES REVOLVING LOAN FUND, REMOVES SUNSET DATE

⁶⁶ "A Moment with Lt. Governor Matt Pinnell," *ROUTE* magazine. <https://www.routemagazine.us/stories/a-moment-with-lt-governor-matt-pinnell>

The Oklahoma legislature created a revolving fund of up to \$6.6 million annually to revitalize and restore Route 66 in advance of the centennial. At the start of the first grant cycle, in December 2023, Pinnell noted that 52% of the sales tax in Oklahoma is collected from communities along Route 66. “I am excited to see the unique project ideas and how they will bring new economic development to Oklahoma,” he said.

As of July 2025, the Oklahoma Route 66 Commission had awarded nearly \$18,500,000 to 36 applicants over three grant cycles. In the 2025 legislative cycle, hoping to benefit from Route 66 as a tourist destination, the legislature removed the sunset date on legislation establishing the grant. Funding for Oklahoma’s Route 66 Revitalization Grant will continue indefinitely.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Data provided by Karla Jackson, Oklahoma Route 66 Grant Coordinator, Oklahoma Department of Commerce, via email on July 15, 2025.

WE WILL SHARE STORIES FROM THESE OKLAHOMA TOWNS:

- Miami (pronounced mi-AM-ah), where we see a community preserve its past in order to secure its future;
- Vinita, where the Cherokee Nation tells its story with a new \$5 million welcome center on Route 66, and where the Hi-Way Café uses giants and neon to create an experience;
- Clinton, where the baton is passing from long-term residents to a group of new residents who are renovating buildings and starting businesses along Route 66, and where the Oklahoma Route 66 Museum pays tribute to the volunteers who kept – and keep – the road alive.
- Sayre, where residents use the arts and the Dust Bowl to spur economic development.



Andy Payne Route 66 race.

Miami: Preserve the past to secure your future

Finding the attractions located along Route 66 is a journey of discovery. Some of the historic sites are perched right there along Main Street, easy to find. Some are embedded in parts of Route 66 overrun with strip malls and fast-food joints. It can feel like trying to find the yellow M&M in a barrel full of orange ones.



The Ku-Ku was built in 1965, one of 200 restaurants in the Ku-Ku chain of burger joints. Today, it is the last Ku-Ku standing.



Miami is called the Gateway to Route 66 in Oklahoma. Its gateway sign is a replica of a sign originally constructed in the 1900s that was removed in the 1930s.

Not so much the Ku-Ku, though. This place jumps right out at you.

The Ku-Ku, with its cheerful cuckoo bird and intricate neon sign, is the last Ku-Ku standing. Built in 1965 on the northern approach to Miami on Route 66, it is the last of 200 restaurants in the Ku-Ku chain of burger joints. All the others are gone now. This one survived due to a man named Gene Waylan, who has owned it since 1973 and still sometimes mans the grill. Midafternoon on a Monday in June, a line of eight cars waits in the drive-through.

This is just one of the singular attractions in Miami, called the “Gateway to Route 66” in Oklahoma. Volunteers, entrepreneurs and artisans have made preserving those attractions a key element of their town’s economic development portfolio.

ELI AND TORI CHENOWETH ARE JUST GETTING STARTED

It’s June in Oklahoma in 2008, sunny and hot in a blueberry field outside town. A lanky nine-year-old named Eli fills bucket after bucket with ripe fruit, which he will sell at the local farmer’s market.

Unlike most people who just got paid, Eli does not splurge on treats. Instead, he saves his profits. This kid has a plan that stretches far into the future. At 15, just six years later, Eli saved enough to open his first business, a 40-square-foot shaved ice shack called the Frozen Elephant. He locates the shack right next to the Ku-Ku.

In 2018, at 19 years old, he paid \$23,000 for the Marathon filling station, a piece of Americana on the National Historic Register. “I’m obsessed with buildings like this,” Chenoweth told the Joplin Globe at the time. “I can’t believe I own this.”⁶⁸

Eli Chenoweth grew up in Miami. So did Tori Lofgren. The two married in 2024. Tori is a year older. “We didn’t start dating until after I graduated in 2017,” she said. “We started flirting in trigonometry,” Eli said, “although she’s letting that slide.” Eli is 6’4”, formerly #11 on the Miami Wardogs basketball team. He has wavy brown hair and a wide smile. Tori has long, strawberry blonde hair, a quiet confidence, and is not dwarfed by her husband. The two are

⁶⁸ “A Marathon Victory,” *Oklahoma Route 66 Association*, May 26, 2023. https://oklahomaroute66.com/news/a-marathon-victory?srsltid=AfmBOooYE6HVb9atrsq-Dfu_hdE-44p9P28xqm5g2qlPw-2xjLerHhlm

equal partners in the business. “We both work so hard to be able to do what we want to do together,” Eli said.

IT WAS THE EYESORE OF SOUTH MAIN STREET

When Eli bought the Marathon station, “it was the eyesore of South Main Street,” Tori said. The station was built in 1929, one of seven identical stations built that year. The other six have since been destroyed. This, like the Ku-Ku, is the last of its kind.

THE HUDSON STATION TRAUMATIZES MOVERS

On a roll, Eli bought an even older gas station just a couple months later. The Hudson station was built in the 1920s. “That was a fun one because it was such a unique building,” Tori said. It’s basically

a five-sided metal box without a floor, with its original windows intact.

They wanted to move the building to the lot next to the Marathon station, but the bottom 12 inches were rotted. The first stop was a welding shop a block away from the original site.

Tori and Eli were at college in Stillwater that morning, on the phone with the movers. When the movers picked up the building, it began to crumple. “Even now when we talk to those guys, they’re still like, no, we’d never do that again,” Eli said. “It was the most stressful block of their lives.”

Today, the Hudson station, just 250 square feet, houses the Frozen Elephant. Next door is the Marathon station, a 330-square-foot jewel box of a short-term rental. In May 2025, the National Trust for Historic Preservation awarded the



Tori and Eli Chenoweth outside the Marathon filling station, on the National Historic Register.

Chenoweths \$10,000 through its Route 66 Legacy Business Grant Program for concrete and facade repair at the Marathon.

ROUTE 66 MEANS OPPORTUNITY

Eli and Tori know they are atypical. Many classmates followed the jobs to bigger cities. But the Chenoweths say Miami is affordable and residents care for each other. Then there is Route 66.

“Route 66 is our life blood,” Eli said. “All of our properties are on Route 66, and we are really proud of that.” He knows that some take the history for granted. “We become too familiar with all of our history,” he said. “We get bored with it.” To him, though, Route 66 means opportunity.

Because Route 66 draws global travelers, it elevates the value of Miami’s past. “We meet travelers from around the world, people from France, Italy, Portugal, Australia, all traveling through Miami, Oklahoma,” Eli said. “Man, that’s cool.”

ELI AND TORI OFFER ADVICE TO OTHER ENTREPRENEURS ON OTHER BYWAYS

Don’t get scared, Tori said. “Lean into it a little. The worst thing that could happen is somebody says no, but that happens in business every single day.” The good days, when the travelers come through and the kids line up for shaved ice, make it all worth it, she said. “You’re never going to have just the easy breezy.”

Start small and don’t bite off more than you can chew, Eli said. Go to farmers markets and pop-up events and prove your point first. “Listen to your market. It’ll tell you what to do,” Eli said. The Miami market, he said, “was needing more people to love

on Route 66, and we saw the opportunity to jump in and help.” The couple also volunteer with the Miami Main Street organization.

And, if you’re going to build an empire, it helps to have a strong partner. “We see each other’s visions,” Eli said. “We listen to each other, and we trust each other. We know at the end of the day, we’re both going to be very proud of what we do.”

SAVE IT NOW, BECAUSE WHEN IT’S GONE, IT’S GONE



Colby Allen explains how neon works in the room in his shop that is dedicated to neon.

When Colby Allen was a kid in the 1960s, his dad was on the National Guard rifle team. He would drop Allen off at his aunt’s house in Yukon on the way to matches in Oklahoma City. Allen remembers nighttime drives, when the neon signs were still up and burning bright. “You look back at that and golly, where did they all go?” he said.

Allen opened Allen Sign Studio in Miami in 1990. When he talks about the lost neon signs, his regret feels like a weight. “I should have been more preservation-minded back in the 1970s when I was in high school,” he said. “But there were other things on my mind than saving signs.”

Allen cares for some of the most iconic neon signs on Oklahoma’s Route 66 – the Ku-Ku, the EAT sign outside Clanton’s Café, and the Coleman Theatre sign. The Coleman was the only place to see movies in the 1970s when Allen was in high school, “but at the time it was just an old ratty theater.”

THE COLEMAN THEATRE RESTORATION IS ONE EXAMPLE OF COMMITTED VOLUNTEERS ON ROUTE 66

The story of Route 66 is dotted with stories about times when people rose to the occasion, gave of their

time and talents, and somehow saved a beloved piece of Route 66 history. Such is the case with the Coleman Theatre.⁶⁹

George L. Coleman, Sr., owned a profitable mining company in the 1920s. He opened a vaudeville theatre in Miami, and it is one flashy, fancy building. The outside is Spanish Colonial Revival, and it has a Louis XV interior complete with dolphins, cherubs and gargoyles. It opened to a full house of 1,600 people at \$1 a seat on April 18, 1929.⁷⁰

What starts as a fabulous attraction can, over time, become a millstone for the people who own it. In 1989, the Coleman family donated the theater to the city. “It never closed, but it needed a lot of work,” Jordan Boyd said. Boyd is director of the Dobson Museum and Home, a privately funded museum in Miami, and one of five volunteer trustees who manage the Coleman. “There were holes in the roof. The chairs needed to be replaced.”



Photo courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

⁶⁹ Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation produced a video about Route 66 in Oklahoma that, among other attractions, features the story of restoring the Coleman Theatre. <https://www.discoveroklahomati.com/episode/routes-the-mother-road>

⁷⁰ Coleman Theatre website. <https://thecolemantheatre.org/>



FORTY THOUSAND VISITORS CAN'T BE WRONG

"I'm so thankful that the older generation had the foresight to save the Coleman Theatre," Allen said. At the time, some Miami residents thought too much money was spent on restoring the Coleman and Route 66 sites and too little on fixing potholes, "I think now they see the value," he said. Miami had 40,000 visitors last year, many from other countries, and nobody had to build a factory or schools or infrastructure. "They just had to preserve what they already had."

Like Eli Chenoweth, Allen said it's easy to take his hometown for granted. Allen recently saw a video a young man posted online. He was on South Main and turned north on Route 66. "He was like, oh man, look at that, oh wow!" Allen said. "I drive those roads every day and I don't say that, but he's right. That *is* cool."

THE FRIENDS PAINTED, CLEANED, SCRAPED GUM OFF THE FLOOR

The Friends of the Coleman volunteers tackled the daunting task of preserving the historic theater. "They were the ones that scraped gum off the floor," Boyd said. "They put new coats of paint on, they cleaned the carpets and the stage, anything and everything that needed to be done."

The Friends raised the money and did the work, Boyd said, because "they wanted to see their children and grandchildren sing and dance on the stage and keep it going."

The Friends are still active, running the concession stand and serving as ushers.



The Coleman Theater today.

KEEP HISTORY RELEVANT FOR YOUR AUDIENCES

Jordan Boyd, with the Dobson Museum, is a sixth generation Ottawa County resident. His advice to other historians along other byways is to keep history relevant to your audiences. The Dobson Museum conducts scavenger hunts with kids in the summer and has trunks full of artifacts and old photos that museum staff members take to local schools, where they share stories about sites like the Coleman and the Ku-Ku. “And then those kids go home,” Boyd said, “and they start asking Mom and Dad and Grandpa and Grandma and start that conversation going and keep it relevant.” A Route 66-themed splash pad that opened a few years back also helps younger people “connect the dots between them and Route 66.”



Route 66 in Miami, Oklahoma. Photo courtesy the Oklahoma Historical Society.

TOURISM BOOSTED THE MIAMI ECONOMY

The Miami economy has ebbed and flowed. The mines were booming up to the late 1960s. BF Goodrich built a tire plant that employed 2,200 at its peak. The plant closed in the 1980s. “Our downtown suffered a great deal when that left,” Boyd said. The



There are ten federally recognized Native American tribes located in or near Miami. Banners downtown say “welcome” in each language, and English.

tide, however, turned again. Miami prospered in the past five or ten years. Boyd credits the impact of tourism along with a strong trio of the Chamber of Commerce, the Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau, and Miami Main Street.

MAIN STREET PROGRAMS AROUND THE U.S.

If you travel back roads, you know the thrill of discovering yet another historic Main Street in yet another small town. Main Street in Miami, with its welcoming arch and expansive roadway, feels grand. Miami holds the title for the longest Main Street on Route 66. It may also hold the title for most tribes nearby. There are ten federally recognized Native American tribes located in or near Miami,⁷¹ and banners downtown say “welcome” in ten Native languages and English.

Jesse Black was hired as executive director of Miami Main Street in the spring of 2025. Black grew up in Miami and often participated in theater productions at the Coleman. “A lot of what Main Street has to offer has been really important to me my whole life,” he said.

⁷¹ “History of Miami,” City of Miami, Oklahoma, website. <https://www.miamiokla.net/285/History-Of-Miami>

The National Trust for Historic Preservation launched the Main Street Program in 1977 with demonstration projects in three cities. The National Main Street Center⁷² grew out of that, and in 2013 it launched as an independent subsidiary of the National Trust and changed its name to Main Street America. Throughout its history, the organization worked with towns around the U.S. to use a four-point approach, focused on organization, promotion, design and economic vitality.⁷³

In 2023, 45 Oklahoma towns had Main Street programs. During 2024, the Main Street programs around the state documented:

- 239 building rehabilitations
- 151 new businesses opening, expanding and relocating
- 54,257 volunteer hours
- 661 new jobs created

In total, private and public reinvestments in 2024 across the state totaled \$268.5 million.⁷⁴

Miami, Black said, is fortunate to have many people who really want to see it succeed. “Finding those people who will champion your byway, who will draw people in and want to see the community thrive, that’s the biggest step.”

YOU DON'T RUN THE PARADE THROUGH YOUR INDUSTRIAL PARK

⁷² *Main Street America website.* <https://mainstreet.org/>

⁷³ “Oklahoma Main Street: Program Guide and Handbook,” <https://www.okcommerce.gov/wp-content/uploads/Oklahoma-Main-Street-Program-Guide.pdf>, p. 6

⁷⁴ “Oklahoma Main Street: The opportunity to make a difference,” Oklahoma Commerce Department. <https://www.okcommerce.gov/community-development/oklahoma-main-street/>

Having a Main Street is a big deal, Matt Wagner said. Wagner is chief innovation officer for Main Street America, the national organization. Most elements that are unique about a community and that make up its brand are located downtown. “You don’t typically run the parade through your industrial park,” Wagner said. “You run it through your downtown.” The downtown usually contains what visitors want to see, like old buildings, local shops and restaurants, and cultural attractions.

Byways reward collaboration because each town is different and most people aren’t looking for just one thing, Wagner said. They want variety. Towns attract more visitors if places are connected and travelers can go from town to town and have some experience that’s unique in each one. “The pie is bigger that way,” Wagner said. “It doesn’t get cut up into smaller pieces.”

RESOURCE

Main Street America Knowledge Hub

The Main Street Resource Center offers strategies, including Main Street America’s extensive Knowledge Hub, a comprehensive digital library containing a broad range of resources, including Main Street Approach handbooks and guides, revitalization toolkits, and vetted materials from across the network.

<https://mainstreet.org/resources/knowledge-hub>

Route 66 Preservation Toolkit

Developed by The Road Ahead Partnership, the toolkit identifies real-world Route 66 preservation success stories, used as case studies to help communities acquire, rehabilitate, or find a new use for an empty building, as well as serve as advocates, and more.



*Matt Wagner, chief innovation officer,
Main Street America.*

The toolkit presents preservation topics in an easy, clear manner.

<https://roadahead.route66centennial.org/index.php/marquee-programs/preservation-toolkit-overview>

Wagner offers some recommendations for towns that want thriving byways.

FOCUS ON IMPROVING THE SOFT INFRASTRUCTURE

The hard infrastructure of byways and trails is becoming more robust, Wagner said. Hard infrastructure includes the byways and trails themselves, as well as hotels, short-term rentals, museums and restaurants.

The pandemic prompted development of and improvements to some of the hard infrastructure. For example, as residents of cities and suburbs escaped to rural areas, rural residents opened short-term rentals. In the first two years of the pandemic, more than 1,300 U.S. towns and cities notched their first-ever Airbnb bookings. In 2021, domestic nights booked by guests on Airbnb for stays in rural America grew 100% compared to 2019, and Airbnb hosts overall netted more than \$3.5 billion over the year, according to Airbnb.⁷⁵

Midcentury motels have been having a comeback since the 1990s. As hotel chains grew more homogeneous, people longing for experiences found restored motels appealing. And where an Airbnb listing can offer isolation, a motel can offer a sense of community.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ "Hosts in rural America earned more than \$3.5 billion in 2021," May 17, 2021, <https://news.airbnb.com/airbnb-hosts-in-rural-america-earn-over-3-5-billion-in-2021/>

⁷⁶ "Across the United States, Vintage Motels Are Being Imagined for Modern Times," *Smithsonian magazine*, May 2, 2024. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/across-the-united-states-vintage-motels-are-being-imagined-for-modern-times-180984269/>

The human capacity to support the hard infrastructure has lagged, Wagner said. Soft infrastructure includes tourism and visitors' bureaus and chambers with resources they can use to promote and market, and that understand the economic and competitive advantages of discrete areas. "What you tend to see happen on the soft side is a kind of 'Anywhere USA' approach," Wagner said, but consumers are interested in hyper personalization. Effective marketing means being able to market in ways that call out the distinctions.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF CONSUMER INTEREST IN THE EXPERIENTIAL

⁷⁷ "Main Spotlight: Introducing the Main Street Business Insights Podcast," *Main Street America*, August 15, 2023. <https://mainstreet.org/the-latest/news/main-spotlight-introducing-the-main-street-business-insights-podcast-2>

Wagner began a podcast⁷⁷ to showcase Main Street stories. The podcast reflects a shift in attitudes toward the transactional and the experiential. Ecommerce and big-box stores have dominated transactional economics, Wagner said. "But there is a big interest, certainly from a consumer perspective, in the experience," he added. Linking stories of Main Street businesses that are more relatable drives consumer experience.

Highlighting local business owners is especially important because about 80% of the local economic or small business base in Main Street communities was started by people who live there. "But we don't tend to put our investment dollars there," Wagner said. "Entrepreneurship and investing in local human capital become imperative" to leverage growth.



Matt Wagner records a podcast with members of The Barbershop Conversation podcast team in Goldsboro, Florida.

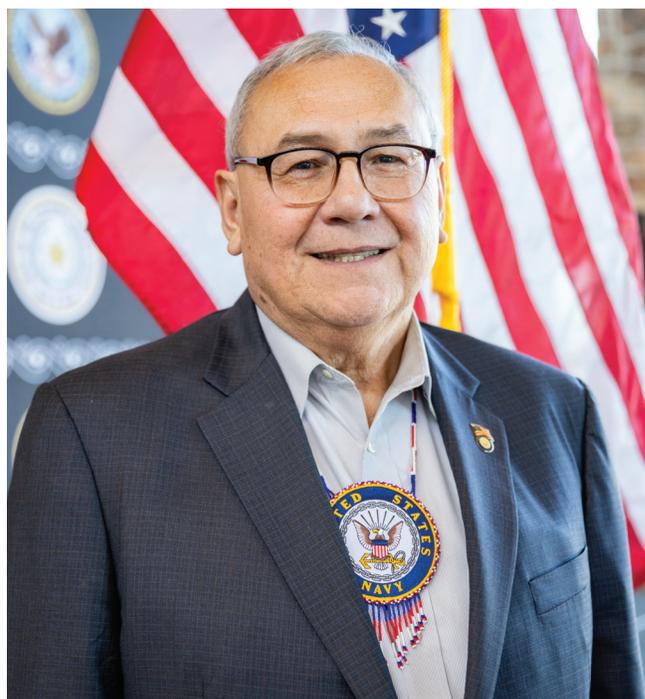
Vinita: The Cherokee Nation story is intertwined with Route 66

Chuck Hoskin recalled a day from his youth when he realized how important the Mother Road was to his town of Vinita, Oklahoma. It was a hot, windy Saturday and families from the farms around Vinita made their weekly trek into town. He saw the familiar faces of farmers hoping to pick up supplies and ease the isolation of farm life for a few hours. Chuck and his dad weaved through the crowds on Route 66, Main Street in Vinita. They had a list of stores to visit and supplies to gather in hand. But then his father stopped, looked out to the street. He told his son to check the license tags of the cars zooming past. “He said I’d see tags from all over the United States, and he was exactly right,” Hoskin recounted. “To me, it was like I could see the world driving by.”

The experience sparked his interest “in finding out exactly what Route 66 was about.”

The byway runs through the history of the Hoskin family and the Cherokee Nation. In 1872, Vinita became the second Cherokee town to incorporate under a law passed by the Cherokee Council,⁷⁸ long before Oklahoma achieved statehood in 1907. The town lies within the 7,000 square miles of the Cherokee Nation Reservation and was founded and organized by the tribe. Hoskin served as mayor of Vinita. His son, Chuck Hoskin Jr., is Cherokee Nation Principal Chief. (To distinguish the two, we’ll call the father Mayor Hoskin and the son Chief Hoskin.)

⁷⁸ Strickland, Rennard. “Cherokee (tribe),” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, Oklahoma Historical Society. <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CH014>.



Chuck Hoskin, Sr., former mayor of Vinita, Oklahoma.



Car shows are popular attractions along Route 66, like this one at Vinita Fest. Photo courtesy Vinita Fest.

As a young man, Mayor Hoskin developed another interest: Harley-Davidson motorcycles. It dovetailed with his interest in the Mother Road. “I decided to drive the route as much as I possibly could,” he said. He traveled the whole road twice. Each time, he sought out people who lived on the route for years and listened to their stories. He found that people struck out on the Mother Road, leaving their pasts behind, despite the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

Years later, he and his wife and some friends gathered for coffee at Clanton’s Café downtown. They were concerned that Vinita residents didn’t recognize the importance of Route 66. This bothered them, so they got to work.

In June of 2025, the group held its 11th annual Vinita Route 66 Festival.⁷⁹ The event draws travelers from other states and countries. “We wanted people to be aware that rural America still exists, that rural America is still vibrant,” Mayor Hoskin said.

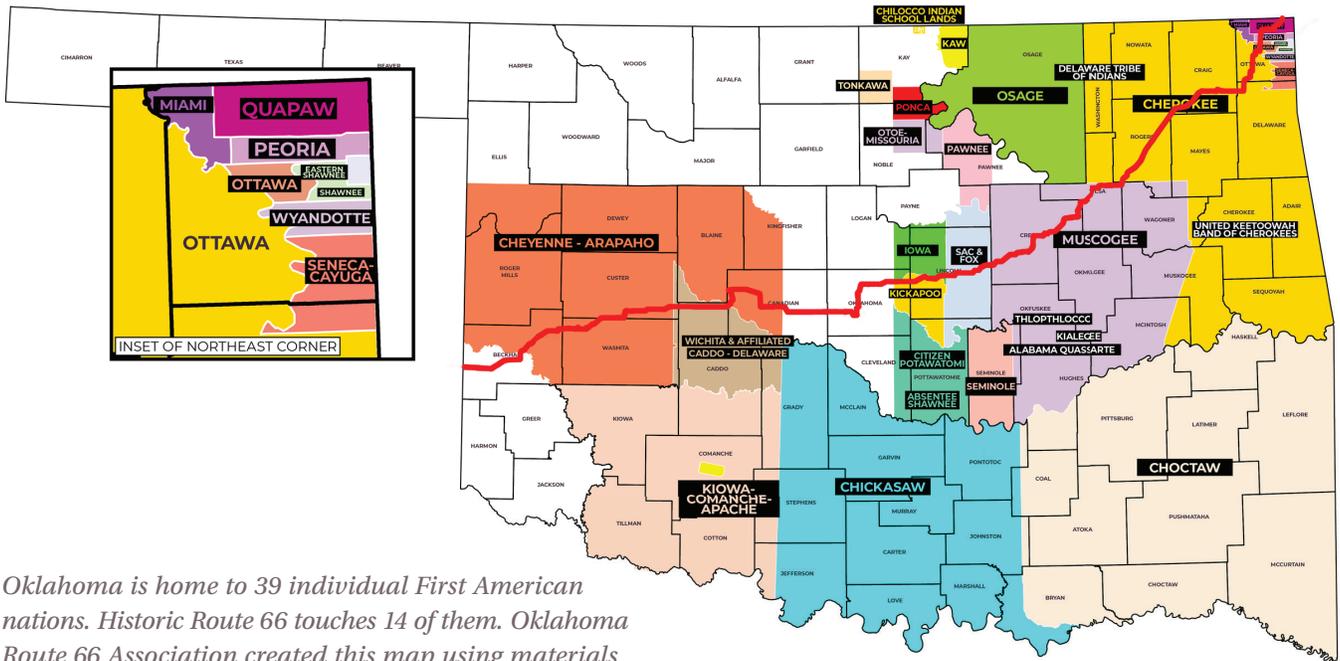
He had advice for other state and local leaders who wanted to make the most of a byway. The main thing is “to invest in the people and the infrastructure

in those areas, knowing the investment will be returned by visitors.” Some will even be drawn to live there. “It’s a population boost, an economic boost, and even more than economics is the educational piece,” Mayor Hoskin said. “People want to know (about the community). And once they do, they want to be part of it.”



All ages enjoy getting behind the wheel on Route 66. Photo courtesy Vinita Fest.

⁷⁹ <https://vinitaroute66festival.com/>



Oklahoma is home to 39 individual First American nations. Historic Route 66 touches 14 of them. Oklahoma Route 66 Association created this map using materials from the Oklahoma State Department of Education. Used with permission, Oklahoma Route 66 Association.

RESOURCE

American Indians & Route 66 guidebook

The American Indigenous Tourism Association (formerly the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association) produced an extensive guidebook, “American Indians & Route 66,” introducing the tribes living along the route. The organization said it sought to inform and to point the way to genuine cultural experiences all along Route 66 - from Chicago to LA.

Note: The guidebook requires 11 x 17 paper to print.

https://americanindigenoustourism.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/American_Indians_Route66.pdf

Additional information from the American Indigenous Tourism Association about travel in Indian Country is available at <https://nativeamerica.travel/>.

<https://americanindigenoustourism.org/>

CULTURAL TOURISM IS KEY TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOR THE CHEROKEE NATION

Like many roadways,⁸¹ Route 66 followed trails built by Native American tribes. More than half of Route 66 across eight states lies in Indian Country.⁸³ In Oklahoma, a significant portion of Route 66 traverses the 14 counties owned by the Cherokee Nation, including towns like Vinita established before Oklahoma achieved statehood.

Cherokee citizens have been involved in civic life before and after Route 66 was established, Chief

⁸¹ “Native American Trails and Places,” *Native American Spaces: Cartographic Resources at the Library of Congress*. <https://guides.loc.gov/native-american-spaces/published-sources/trails#:~:text=Historical%20maps%20routinely%20depict%20networks,associated%20with%20American%20Indian%20communities.>

⁸³ “From False Advertising to Cultural Exchange: Native Americans, New Mexico, and Route 66,” *National Trust for Historic Preservation*, August 20, 2018. <https://savingplaces.org/stories/from-false-advertising-to-cultural-exchange-native-americans-new-mexico-and-route-66>

Hoskin said. “The road weaves through communities that remain Cherokee communities.” New generations understood that they were Oklahomans and Americans, and they were also Cherokee. “The road had the same significance to generations of Cherokees as it had to generations of Oklahomans and Americans in that it was liberating,” he said. “It offered access to a ribbon of transportation, a good road crossing the country.”

When Route 66 was first established in the 1920s, Chief Hoskin said, the state of Oklahoma designated the national road across tribal territories, which involved acquisition of property rights of way. “The road went through land that had, within living memory, been through the brutal allotment era,” Chief Hoskin said. Allotment divided land held communally by Indian tribes into private property.^{84, 85} The policy of allotment began in 1887, and resulted in the loss of more than half of Indian tribal lands before the government ended the policy in the 1930s.⁸⁶



Chuck Hoskin, Jr., principal chief, Cherokee Nation.

In the 1970s, Cherokees began working to revive the Cherokee Nation. In 1976, a federal judge found the government wrongfully prevented the Cherokee Nation from exercising its governmental rights.⁸⁷ The Nation used that ruling as a springboard to economic development and today creates more than \$3.1 billion annual economic impact.⁸⁸

In 2008, the Nation identified cultural tourism as an important economic development tool and started its Cherokee Nation Cultural Tourism initiative. It used skills built through its gaming businesses to diversify business opportunities and achieve benefits of cultural tourism, such as continuing the culture and language, and developing social and political goodwill.⁸⁹

Keith Austin, with the Cherokee Nation Cultural Tourism Group, is sitting in front of one of the cultural attractions as we speak. The Cherokee Nation bought the Will Rogers birthplace ranch⁹⁰

⁸⁴ “The History of the Cherokee Nation,” Cherokee Nation website. <https://www.cherokee.org/about-the-nation/history/>

⁸⁵ Clara Sue Kidwell, “Allotment,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=AL011>.

⁸⁶ “Reservations and Allotments,” *Native American Spaces: Cartographic Resources at the Library of Congress*. <https://guides.loc.gov/native-american-spaces/cartographic-resources/reservations-allotments>

⁸⁷ Smith, Chad, “Telling our story - Case study of the Cherokee Nation Cultural Tourism initiative” (2008). *UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers and Capstones*. 637. <http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/1755424>

⁸⁸ “Cherokee Nation \$3.1B economic impact fuels jobs and growth,” *ictnews.org*, April 13, 2025

⁸⁹ Smith, Chad, “Telling our story - Case study of the Cherokee Nation Cultural Tourism initiative” (2008). *UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers and Capstones*. 637. <http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/1755424>

⁹⁰ “Will Rogers Birthplace Ranch,” *Visit Cherokee Nation website*. <https://visitchokeenation.com/attractions/will-rogers-birthplace-ranch/>



The Will Rogers Birthplace Ranch. Photo courtesy the Cherokee Nation.

in the town of Oologah from the Oklahoma Historical Society in 2023.⁹¹ Rogers, at one time arguably the most famous American,⁹² was a Cherokee Nation citizen. “It’s very hard for a small community to have any real money to invest in tourism,” Austin said. “The Cherokee Nation, however, is making those investments that really have an impact on every person who lives in Cherokee Nation, not just the Cherokees.”

As of 2025, the Cherokee Nation operated ten cultural attractions, the newest of which is situated on Route 66.⁹³

WELCOME CENTER BRINGS THE CHEROKEE STORY TO ROUTE 66

When the tribe wanted a place for people to learn about Cherokee culture, First Lady January Hoskin suggested locating the \$5 million Cherokee Nation Anna Mitchell Cultural and Welcome Center⁹⁴ on

⁹¹ “OK Historical Society sells Will Rogers’ birthplace to Cherokee Nation, KJRH News Oklahoma, June 12, 2023. <https://www.kjrh.com/news/local-news/ok-historical-society-sells-will-rogers-birthplace-to-chokeee-nation>

⁹² Will Rogers Memorial Museum website. <https://www.willrogers.com/>

⁹³ Visit Cherokee Nation website. <https://visitcherokeeanation.com/>

⁹⁴ Cherokee Nation Anna Mitchell Cultural & Welcome Center, Visit Cherokee Nation. <https://visitcherokeeanation.com/attractions/anna-mitchell-cultural-welcome-center/>



Anna Mitchell, the namesake of the new Cherokee Nation Anna Mitchell Cultural and Welcome Center in Vinita, Oklahoma.

Route 66 in Vinita. Anna Mitchell was a potter and Cherokee National Treasure. She was known for the revitalization of traditional Cherokee pottery and was widely accepted as an authority on both Southeastern and Eastern Woodlands styles of pottery.

The center offers informational exhibits about Cherokee history and culture, a permanent exhibit of Mitchell's pottery, and traveling exhibits of Cherokee artists inspired by her example. Other elements, such as the chandelier and the fountain, are also original works of art.

"The Center doesn't trace the history of Route 66," Chief Hoskin said, "it traces Cherokee history." You don't have to be about the byway to benefit from proximity, in other words. "It's literally turning off the highway and seeing something that they may

not have anticipated when they were thinking about what a journey on Route 66 might mean."

SPEAK UP AND BUILD PARTNERSHIPS

For other communities wanting to assure their own stories are told, Chief Hoskin said, "Speak up." Remaining quiet assures they will remain invisible. "They'll be ignored not because of willful ignorance," he said, "but because of the relative obscurity of the story."

Partnerships with the Oklahoma Route 66 Association and other groups have helped assure the Cherokee Nation's story is included. In state government, Chief Hoskin said, Lt. Gov. Pinnell "has been purposeful about making sure that tribal nations are involved in the Route 66 Centennial celebration."



The Welcome Center fountain offers a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside. Like other displays, the fountain was crafted by Cherokee Nation artists.

Vinita: Be like the Hi-Way Café, and create an experience

It is 2 o'clock in the morning and Beth and Alan Hilburn need their sleep. They own the Hi-Way Café and the Western Motel, vintage properties about two miles west of Vinita, Oklahoma, on Route 66. There are no other businesses nearby. It's just the café and the motel on a gravel lot nestled by the old road on the prairie. The Hilburns work long hours and they start their days early. But the security cameras outside the café are going crazy, so Beth takes a look.



Beth Hilburn, with Big Bill outside the Hi-Way Café.

She sees six college-age kids running around in the night, taking selfies with the giants – Big Bill and Big Indian – and the neon Hi-Way Café sign and the Betty Boop by the café door.

She was not annoyed, she was thrilled.

“I thought, yes, that’s exactly what I’m trying to do,” Hilburn said. “Create excitement for that group of people who never experienced the traditional Americana road trip.”

Beth Hilburn knows about road trips. Her mom and dad had many daughters and little money. Flying was expensive, so if they needed to go anywhere, they drove. Road trips started in the kitchen, her parents frying chicken and packing provisions for the family’s roadside picnic. On the trip to visit her Texas grandparents, her dad’s favorite stop was a hole-in-the-wall restaurant with sawdust on the floor and armadillos in a big round pen out back. “We always seemed to find quirky, unique places,” Hilburn said. “To me, that’s what Americana stood for and what I tried to recreate here. I wanted someplace

where kids can do more than eat, they can have something to do and see.”

There are no armadillos at the Hi-Way Café, at least not in any official capacity, but there is a lot of other stuff. Along with Hilburn’s passion for creating an experience for travelers, the business also reflects their connection with the local community and with other business owners across the byway.

HOW DID THE HILBURNS END UP HERE?

Beth and Alan Hilburn were high school sweethearts in Cross Plains, a tiny town in West Texas. They married after college and lived in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Beth worked in the American Airlines marketing department and Alan owned a trucking company. When their daughter was young, Beth’s parents moved to Vinita, and her 80-year-old dad

bought the Western Motel. That was the third motel her parents owned in Beth’s lifetime. “They loved all the travelers, people coming and going,” Beth said. Soon after, the Hilburns moved to Vinita to be near family.

Ten years went by. When the restaurant next door to the Western Motel went up for auction, Beth’s now 90-year-old dad bought it. He asked the Hilburns to run it for six months just to get it off the ground. Alan loves to cook, and the couple briefly owned a restaurant years before. “And here we are,” Beth said, “14 years later.”

LOYAL LOCAL FOLLOWING LEADS TO NATIONAL SPOTLIGHT AND FIRST GIANT

Initially, the Hilburns focused on providing quality food and a friendly, comfortable experience for



The Hi-Way Café worked with Mobil-1 to set a world record for “most stickers on a car,” using a 1963 American Rambler, 60,066 half-inch stickers and more than 100 volunteers.



Big Bill is 21 feet tall, with a suitcase that won't fit in the overhead bin. He is named after Beth Hilburn's dad, who died in 2020 at 100 years old.

customers. They built a strong local base, with regulars who acted as bonus grandparents for the Hilburn children (now 28, 19 and 6).

When COVID hit, the Hi-Way Café started its Giving Wall. “Northeastern Oklahoma is very rural,” Hilburn explained. “The kids weren’t in school and they needed their school lunches.” People paid for meals in advance, and the donated tickets were posted on the wall. The Giving Wall was a way for parents to get food for their kids during the pandemic, but it was open to anyone who needed help. The café kept it going after COVID and, as of August 2025, the Giving Wall had provided 2000 meals.

The Giving Wall caught the attention of a film crew from Mobil-1, which was filming a documentary⁹⁶ for its “Keep Route 66 Kickin’” campaign. Mobil-1 was looking for places that could hold events with the Guinness Book of World Records. “I couldn’t say yes fast enough,” Beth said. In November of 2022, working with Mobil-1, the Hi-Way Café set a world record for “most stickers on a car,” using a 1963 American Rambler, 60,066 half-inch stickers and more than 100 volunteers.

GIANTS ARE POPPING UP LIKE PRAIRIE DOGS

During the promotion, Mobil-1 hauled a Muffler Man back and forth across Route 66. He’s 21 feet tall, with a suitcase that will not fit in the overhead bin. After the promotion, Beth convinced Mobil-1 to let them buy the Muffler Man. The Hilburns named him Big Bill after Beth’s dad, Bill Wood, who died in 2020 at 100 years old. It whets their appetite for more giants.

⁹⁶ “Keep Route 66 Kickin’” Mobil 1. https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL21UPXIYqodHdBHw4t1DI2bUxWqOOyyJ&si=fz97_aOFPLBMzCqo

In 2023, the Hilburns bought “Big Indian,” who stood for 49 years outside a store in Massachusetts. Beth, an enrolled member of the Delaware and Cherokee Nations, and Alan said they would restore the statue and honor indigenous heritage when they brought it back to Oklahoma.

The Hilburns are currently preparing space by the café for a third giant, Big AL, a 21-foot-tall chef they bought from a Springfield, Missouri, food-truck court.⁹⁷

Hilburn said Oklahoma’s wild weather never bothered her before the giants arrived. “I do get a little nervous,” she said. She and Alan took extra precautions, reinforcing Big Bill and Big Indian up to the waist and then anchoring them into the ground. “They’re very well tethered.”

NEON SIGNS RESTORED VIA GRANTS FROM STATE, NATIONAL GROUPS

Neon’s heyday spanned the 1930s through the 1950s, and its warm glow illuminated businesses and attractions along Route 66. But neon, created by applying electricity to gas in a sealed glass tube, is fragile.⁹⁸ Restoring neon signs is central to restoring Route 66, with funds from states and national organizations used to get old signs glowing again.

When Tom Schwartz built the Hi-Way Café in 1963, he also built its neon sign. Over the years, the neon broke and the metal had begun to rot. The Oklahoma and Missouri Route 66 associations helped the Hilburns apply for a grant from the National Park

⁹⁷ For a map of most of America’s giants, check this out: <https://www.roadsideamerica.com/map/theme/86>

⁹⁸ “6 Places Where You Can Bask in the Glow of Historic Neon Signs,” *Preservation Magazine*, Summer 2023. <https://savingplaces.org/stories/six-places-where-you-can-bask-in-the-glow-of-historic-neon-signs>



Big Indian stood for 49 years outside a store in Massachusetts before the Hilburns brought him to Oklahoma.



Hi-Way Café sign relighting ceremony in March 2023. Photo by Rhys Martin.

Service's Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program (a 50/50 cost share grant). Beth also applied for a grant through the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Backing Historic Small Restaurants Grant Program. The Hilburns won both grants.

The restoration⁹⁹ took months. In March 2023, Schwartz, the original owner, flipped the switch. The Hi-Way Café sign glowed once again.

After Beth's dad died, the Hilburns bought the Western Motel from her mom and remodeled all 20 rooms. Long ago, somebody had replaced the original neon sign, which featured a cowboy on a galloping horse wielding a lariat, with a plastic backlit sign. The Hilburns received a neon sign grant from the Oklahoma Route 66 Association, funded by the Oklahoma Department of Commerce, as part of their preparations for the centennial.

⁹⁹ For photos of the restoration, check this out: <https://savingplaces.org/stories/along-route-66-the-hi-way-cafe-sign-shines-again>

BETH MAKES CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE BYWAY AND IN VINITA

Beth Hilburn has a friendly smile and Southern charm. She is gracious, patient and appears to be having a great time despite long days and hard work. The Hi-Way Café is supposed to be closed today, but this Tuesday, she is getting ready to cater lunch for a convoy traveling the Jefferson Highway, which intersects Route 66 in Oklahoma. About 15% of their tourist trade comes from the Jefferson Highway and 85% from Route 66, she said, and the café is an official visitor center.

Later that day, she and Alan were spotted at 5 p.m. cleaning rooms, and then at 8 p.m. she was posting on the Hi-Way Café Facebook page. A typical post is a photo of a smiling group and some version of the message, "These nice folks are from Denmark/Mexico/Ireland/France/Italy/Australia/New Zealand.

They came by when the café was closed but I just had to show them around.”

Three long byways are based on historic roadways

The Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City – the Tenth District – includes miles of three very long historic roadways.

- **The Jefferson Highway,¹⁰⁰ originally routed in 1916, runs from Winnipeg, Canada, to New Orleans. It cuts through western Missouri in the Tenth District and follows the path of Route 66 from Joplin, Mo., to Vinita, Okla.**
- **The Lincoln Highway,¹⁰¹ dedicated in 1913, runs 3,389 miles from New York City to San Francisco, including much of Nebraska and Wyoming in the Tenth District.**
- **Route 66, dedicated in 1926, covers 2,448 miles between Chicago and Santa Monica.¹⁰²**

The sense of family Hilburn cultivates among local customers and travelers is something she also values as a member of the Route 66 community. She was recently elected eastern vice president of the Oklahoma Route 66 Association.

Hilburn understands the value of marketing other businesses on a byway. The businesses east and west of Vinita send people to her and she does the

¹⁰⁰ *The Jefferson Highway Association website.*
<https://jeffersonhighway.org/>

¹⁰¹ *Lincoln Highway Association website.*
<https://www.lincolnhighwayassoc.org/>

¹⁰² *National Historic Route 66 Federation website.*
<https://national66.org/> has links to state associations and other resources, including a well-regarded guidebook

same for them. “I have business cards for Gearhead Curios and he sends people to me,” she said. “The camaraderie...it truly is a family among all the businesses. If you’re a small business owner, you sometimes feel like you’re out here doing your own thing, so it’s wonderful to have people with the same desires, the same goals.”

The advice she would give to another entrepreneur on another byway is, “Find something that you truly love and are truly passionate about. If you’re passionate about it, that draws people in naturally.”



Clinton: This is how you pass the torch

In April, 2025, Oklahoma's Route 66 Commission awarded \$968,500 to the West OK Co-op, a group of volunteers in their 30s and 40s operating out of a storefront in downtown Clinton, Oklahoma. The grant will pay for the Hub City Gateway project, built over a 400-foot stretch of the original 1926 Route 66 road base. The project will feature a massive double-sided sign structure and art installation designed to entice travelers into downtown Clinton. According to the proposal, this project "reimagines the Route 66 experience, engaging future generations of travelers while bridging the gap between historic legacy and emerging city leadership."

The grant award marks a significant milestone in a story that began in 2006, when Jason and Meridith Smith arrived in Clinton, Oklahoma, population around 8,500.¹⁰³ Over time, the Smiths befriended and began connecting with creative types, including one energetic architect. They named themselves the West OK Co-op. Through weekly meetings, brainstorming and action, they are helping Clinton use its strengths, including its spot on Route 66, in new ways.

The group garnered support from the mayor of Clinton, a 73-year-old Baby Boomer named David Berrong. He is currently in his ninth year as mayor of the town where he's lived most of his life. "I'm a product of the 1960s and 1970s, the hippie generation," Berrong said. "With the West OK Co-op, there's a hippie look, but these are business-people. And they are practical. They're not coming as a radical influence into an older community



¹⁰³ "Clinton," World Population Review. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/oklahoma/clinton>



Jason Smith and Andrew Stone outside White Dog Hill, a restaurant on the prairie outside Clinton.

that is also trying to reinvent itself. There's some wisdom there." Berrong pauses for a couple beats. "I was impressed with them from the beginning."

JASON SMITH IS THE GUY ON THE SKATEBOARD

Jason Smith grew up southeast of Clinton in Duncan, Oklahoma, where the landscape includes trees and lakes. He moved west to study classical guitar and marketing at Southwestern Oklahoma State University in Weatherford. He was drawn to the land, so different from Duncan. He saw how that difference affected residents, spread over miles of flat, semi-arid land under an encompassing sky. "People have strong opinions here, but at the end of the day they know that they're going to need each other at some point," Smith said, "so there's this sense of community that I didn't get other places."

Jason met and married Meredith out west. After graduation they traveled, until Meredith's sister's husband needed help in his bail bonds business and on construction projects. They thought the move to Clinton would be temporary. That was nearly 20 years ago.

"When we got here, there was just so much opportunity that no one was recognizing," Smith said, "like in these old buildings that are selling for \$2 a square foot." They weren't even pricing the top floors, he said, just the square footage on the bottom. Smith learned carpentry from his brother-in-law, and one project led to another. The couple and their three children moved into the second floor of an old brick building they renovated downtown.

"I was always the guy without a shirt, skateboarding in the middle of the street," Smith said of his time



David Berrong is in his ninth year as mayor of Clinton, where he has lived for most of his life.

in Clinton. “I don’t know how people judge your maturity, but that’s just who I was.” Smith was off the community’s radar until about five years ago, when he began buying more property. “As we started to purchase property along Route 66 in the historic downtown,” Smith said, “I started asking how come we’re not marketing this, how about signage, how about wayfinding? It felt to me like the community had turned its back on Route 66.” Smith joined some local boards, like zoning, where people began to listen to him.

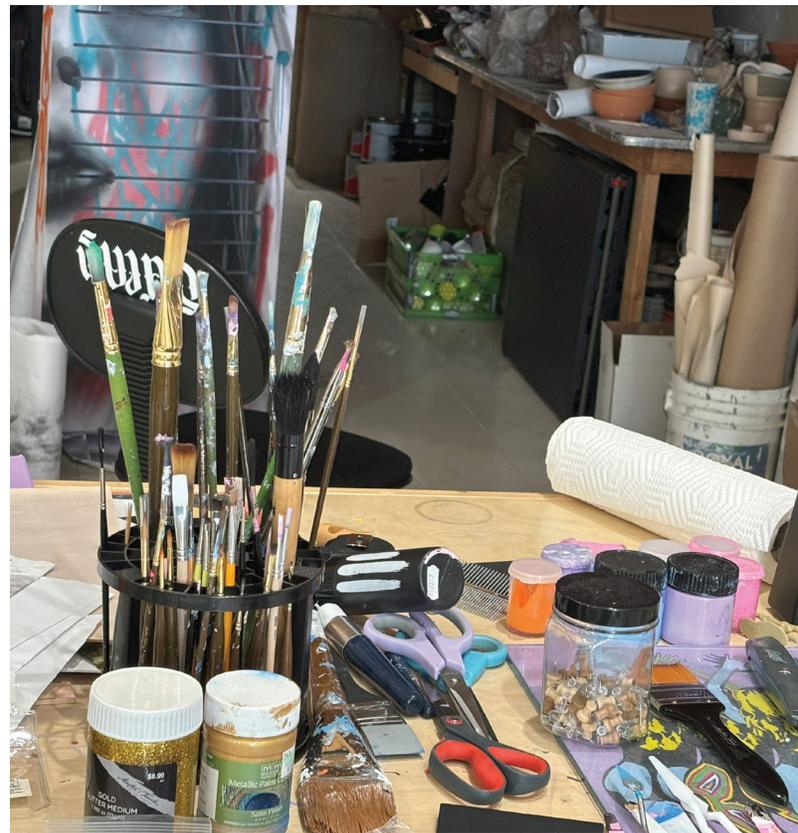
West OK Co-op is working hard to promote Route 66 in Clinton, Pat Smith said, because co-op members realize what an impact the Mother Road has. Pat Smith (no relation to Jason) recently retired as director of the Oklahoma Route 66 Museum. That doesn’t mean West OK Co-op was embraced from the start. “At first, I think some of the older people here in Clinton were kind of standoffish,” she said.

“You know, like ‘they have all these big ideas, but they don’t know what they’re doing.’ But then people realized that this group does know what they’re doing and, in fact, they’re doing a great job.” Smith is a life-long resident of Clinton and served for 30 years at the museum.

WEST OK CO-OP ATTRACTS ECLECTIC GROUP OF CREATIVES

When Smith first moved to Clinton, he looked for his friends from college, but most had moved away to wherever they could get jobs in creative fields. “A lot of them were still proud to be from Western Oklahoma,” Smith said, and he asked them to do a project a year in the area. They helped when they could.

A few years later, Jason and Meridith renovated the first floor at 613 Frisco Avenue downtown and



painted “West OK Co-op” on the door. They moved in all the creative equipment they ever wanted to use. They have equipment for sewing, pottery, weaving and painting. They also have a woodworking shop, an 1890 letterpress machine, and a recording studio with musical instruments. They even have a ramp for skateboarders.

“I was craving a space that people could come to and take their art seriously,” Smith said. As soon as they opened the West OK Co-op, “it started this family,” Smith said. “We’ve been so lucky with everybody that’s made themselves at home here.”

ARTISTS FIND A HOME BASE AT THE CO-OP

Damian Lopez and Sean Gonzales are cousins and artists, in that order. Gonzales’s artist name is SWAB, and he works in mixed media. Lopez’s artist name is Tallly, and he provides illustration in various media. Both work full-time but spend Saturdays and some evenings creating art. Both are members of the co-op’s board of directors.

At first, Gonzales thought “co-op” meant farming co-op. Another artist convinced him to visit. “And sure enough, there was an art space.” He calls Meridith and Jason kindred spirits. Still, the first time he dropped paint on the floor, he was nervous. “Jason just laughed. He doesn’t want it to seem like it’s an art museum. It’s a workshop.”

At first, the various artists in the co-op would bump heads, Lopez said. He credits honesty with keeping the loosely organized group of artists together. “If you’re afraid of conflict you don’t have a team,” he said. “You have to be able to say what matters to you and trust you’re going to work it out.” Today the artists sometimes produce and sell art together under the name Neverdaze, and share the proceeds.

The cousins don’t think the co-op set out to change the culture of Clinton, but they think maybe it has by giving artists a place to create. Gonzales said of himself and Lopez, “our art is hanging at the hospital where the two of us were born.”

ANDREW STONE ADDS URBAN DESIGN TO THE CO-OP’S FOCUS ON ART

Co-op cofounder Jason Smith noted that, in its early years, the group’s main contribution to the town of Clinton was murals the artists donated. Things changed when architectural designer Andrew Stone arrived. Stone grew up in Thomas, a small town near

Sean Gonzales stands in front of one of his paintings.



Clinton. His mother is from Italy; his dad is American. “I had the regular Italian family traditions, but in a very small American town,” he said. Stone’s dad was a home builder. Stone got his bachelor’s degree in architecture from the University of Oklahoma and worked in Oklahoma City as an architect.

But then, like so many other Oklahomans, Stone left for California. He got his Master of Architecture degree from the Southern California Institute of Architecture, SCI-Arc. In 2020, during the pandemic, Stone moved back to his home state and settled in Clinton. Stone sees architecture as a form of public service, and western Oklahoma was where he wanted to serve. Western Oklahoma has few registered architects.



West OK Co-op hosts a community conversation.

When he arrived, he found the West OK Co-op, “a group of very interesting artists and locals working in this collaborative space in a historic building downtown,” Stone said. “It had a cosmopolitan environment situated in a small, localized place, and that was just the perfect fit for me.”

Stone is a lecturer at the University of Oklahoma, and serves as liaison between the Institute for

Quality Communities and the school’s Division of Architecture. He is the founder and principal of Ocra Projects,¹⁰⁴ a firm that focuses on architecture, cultural placemaking and community revitalization. He is also chief design officer for West OK Co-op.

THE SOCIAL GIVES OLD CHURCH NEW LIFE, AND CLINTON A NEW GATHERING SPOT

When Jason and Meridith designed their second-floor apartment in downtown Clinton, they built a deck out back. It has an outdoor shower overlooking buildings downtown, including a vacant Presbyterian church. “So while I’m in the shower,” Smith said, “this old church is just staring at me.” For a year or two, the church sat there, empty. Staring. The Presbytery was asking \$250,000.

Eventually, Smith offered \$50,000. They said no and made a counteroffer of \$75,000. “I was like, oh gosh,” Smith said. “And then I said no, I don’t need a church. That’s the last thing I really need.” They suggested Smith counter. “I said \$55,000 and they said, okay, we’ll take it. Then I was like, oh my gosh, I gotta go tell Meridith I just bought a church.”

Stone arrived in Clinton while the Smiths were turning the inside of the church into a wedding venue. There was something else that they wanted: an outdoor space. Stone designed the landscape and Smith spent 18 months of “solid, back-breaking work” to turn the space into The Social. It’s open Thursday and Friday evenings, with a cocktail bar and catered food. It has become a popular gathering spot. “We went from not having a backyard to having the most legit thing in the world,” Smith said. He is quick to give Stone credit.

Stone functions at a highly conceptual level, but

¹⁰⁴ www.ocraprojects.com



Clinton locals gather early on a Thursday evening in June at The Social.

he will happily translate architect-speak for the layperson. He is so enthusiastic about his work that you cannot help but be pulled along in his wake. The man is having fun.

Smith and Stone have an easy rapport. They appreciate one another's strengths. Smith said of Stone, "We pick up on a lot of the same nuances, but his go much deeper. He's a smart guy." Stone brought to West OK Co-op knowledge of grants available for towns like Clinton and for projects like those related to the Route 66 Centennial.

OKLAHOMA ROUTE 66 MUSEUM CHANGES THE TRAJECTORY OF CLINTON, SORT OF

David Berrong, Clinton's mayor, is the third generation Berrong to call Clinton home. "This was about as fantastic a rural community as anyone could grow up in," he said. Berrong left for ten years, then returned to Clinton and joined the family's wholesale distribution business.

"It was a thriving area for decades," Berrong said. Then in the mid-1980s, the farm economy imploded. Big box stores, technical advances and in later years online shopping began to put pressure on "an unchanging economic environment of downtown Main Streets and mom-and-pop stores," Berrong said.

Berrong calls himself a realistic optimist. "To go forward as a community, one has to deal with the reality of what has happened and what our new challenges are in Clinton." That's what matters to him, he said. "It's the only thing I have any real input on, the narrative of the future."

We're meeting downtown at the Route 66 Café on a Saturday morning. The mayor just finished presiding over the Clinton Classic Run, a local 5K and 10K race, delayed by a thunderstorm. He's wearing a slightly damp pink shirt, a grey Clinton Classic Run gimme cap, and he has bright white hair and goatee.



“This was Dorsey’s Fruit Market when I was a kid,” Berrong said. Ten years ago, a couple bought the vacant building and turned it into a restaurant. They saw an opportunity. Locals, he said, could not imagine creating a remarkable future by revitalizing things like Route 66 that time left behind.

Berrong said we wouldn’t be talking about tourism at all, except for one thing: The Oklahoma Route 66 Museum. The state reimagined the old Western Trails Museum in Clinton as the Oklahoma Route 66 Museum, opening in 1995. In 2012, the state wanted to renovate but grants fell short. Clinton residents raised \$389,000 to match state funds and complete the renovation. “We took the challenge,” Berrong said, “and we raised the money.” Today, the museum is considered one of the best along the eight-state route, consistently drawing at least 50,000 visitors a year. Visitors come from all over the world.

WEST OK CO-OP ENTICES VISITORS INTO CLINTON, CELEBRATING SMALL TOWN LIFE

The museum is located off I-40 rather than Route 66. You can visit the museum, get lunch at a nearby chain restaurant and hop back on the interstate. Andrew Stone recounted seeing a big group of bikers and their Harley-Davidsons when he stopped by the restaurant recently. “They were eating their sandwiches, sitting around,” Stone said. “When I walked by them, I realized they were all speaking French.” He asked himself, why are these people not finding their way into downtown Clinton? And how can we fix this?

“Andrew and I get excited about getting people to take exit 69, the Route 66 corridor through Clinton,” Smith said. “We have to sell them on our Main Street, our

historic area.” They focused on creating new wayfinding techniques and interests, like the new Clinton sign.

Route 66 has potential to connect people to place, and account for a place’s history in a unique way, Stone said. It highlights places that would typically be considered flyover country, and it shapes people as much as people shape the route. “Yes, we love the milkshakes and diners and stuff,” he said, “but it really is an experience that can be expanded into much broader regional narratives” and even global narratives, with the foreign visitors coming to town. “There’s a sense of metropolitanism that could come with Route 66,” he said.

Route 66 always had an enterprising quality, Stone said. It’s a quality that benefits communities today. Entrepreneurs on the original Route 66 opened new types of businesses, like service stations, roadhouses, motels and motor courts. They developed businesses specific to the needs of travelers. Today’s gig economy, he said, is producing new business models allowing people to have their individual enterprises, which could be a good fit for the old road.

To benefit from the potential of a byway like Route 66, it requires taking what some might see as a relic of the past and showing how it can add value to the present.

THE BITTERSWEET NATURE OF MEMORY

Stone sometimes rides around town with a local historian. “[This man] remembers every tree that used to be planted in an area, or the old bank that got torn down,” Stone said. Oklahoma is a young state, and early residents may not have seen their artifacts as historic or part of their culture. “They really trusted the sense of progress,” Stone said. “But now there’s no place to put their memory. It’s

been erased, and that’s something that needs to be understood. We’re pursuing a healing process for these generations.”

Stone designed two projects funded by the Oklahoma Route 66 Commission. Along with the Hub City Gateway project in Clinton, there is Hydro, where they are repurposing an old bridge to be a lookout over the town. Both projects, he said, reuse artifacts from the past. Stone calls them “ghosted.”

“Ghosted means they’re forgotten but not gone,” Stone said. “There is still a physical presence that can be restored, but not in a conventional way. How do we repurpose these ghosted places and make them sites for new expression?” The Hub City Gateway uses an original 1926 stretch of Route 66 as a walking path. The Hydro bridge continues its service by serving as a lookout. “The bridge has so many bumps and bruises and blemishes and imperfections that tell the story of times people wrecked into it,” Stone said, and that’s something both locals and non-locals appreciate.

The lesson Stone would love to teach small towns about economic development is that repurposing artifacts is about “clawing back our identity,” he said. “Things that may seem like burdens or anchors can be flipped back into assets by looking at them through a different lens, rather than tearing them down.”

New technology, too, may give new life to ghosted buildings – those that still have a physical presence – as well as buildings that have been lost. “Tourists want to be enchanted,” Stone said. New tools, like augmented reality, mean that just because the building is gone doesn’t mean the memory isn’t there or that the story can’t be told. The story can span the physical space and a digital one.

“I’M INTERESTED IN ROUTE 66 BECAUSE IT’S A LIFE I’LL NEVER HAVE”

Stone’s work in Clinton and on Route 66 is part of his life-long commitment to small towns. He hopes visitors understand that small towns can possess all the wonderful qualities of metropolitan environments, just in a smaller, more localized manner. “Rural towns are not synonymous with the past,” he said. “They deserve to be understood in a contemporary light. Their quality of life is just as precious as any other place, and visitors play a role.”

Stone said the mayor and others in Clinton were surprised by how younger people are engaged in Route 66. The older residents thought of Route 66 as nostalgia. “To them, Route 66 is synonymous with the past, and they didn’t think about Route 66 as being a torch that can be passed” to younger generations. “How does the younger community learn from the older community and not make it a rogue pursuit?” Stone asked. “This is an opportunity to pass the torch in a very responsible and respectful way.”

Berrong said he used to be stunned that younger people cared about Route 66, but no longer. “It’s not that they’ll ever experience the real Route 66,” Berrong said. “They won’t have lived on it. But there is a romanticism. One girl put it this way. She said, ‘I’m interested in it because it’s a life I’ll never have, but I want to travel and see the way it was.’”

Pat Smith, the museum director, credits West OK Co-op with prompting visitors, such as those having a wedding at The Social, to visit the museum. The people who visit the museum don’t only want to do that, she said, they also want to go downtown and see the history. “We’ve heard many positive

comments here at the museum about how they’re making the town thrive,” she said.

ADVICE FOR PEOPLE MAKING CHANGE...

Jason Smith said that the effectiveness of West OK Co-op in Clinton boils down to two things: consistency and vulnerability.

Consistency means the work is regular and ongoing. The West OK Co-op board and others meet nearly every Tuesday to keep the ball rolling. And they keep in touch with state and local leaders. “We’re popping in on meetings, or emailing to ask if there’s anything coming up,” Smith said. “Being plugged in does matter, but not in a political sellout way. It’s just being involved.” That consistency led to the state asking West OK Co-op to host one of its Route 66 Centennial kick-off meetings.

Vulnerability, Smith said, keeps ideas flowing. The group invites people from outside the co-op to their brainstorming sessions, for example. “A lot of the things you’re saying during brainstorming are stupid,” Smith said, “but it’s those stupid things that get you to that good thing.”

A lack of vulnerability can make a community stale. While Clinton is supportive overall, people sometimes look at a new idea with laser beams, picking it apart. Hanging string lights downtown can be great, he said, “but then you get, ‘What’s going to happen in two years when the bulbs go out?’ and ‘What happens when you move away and nobody’s here to fix it?’ And sometimes they’re right.” It takes vulnerability to be willing to share ideas anyway.

Also, be prepared to explain and teach repeatedly. He and Stone wanted to get the community involved

in the Hub City Gateway project, Smith said, so it wouldn't just be a West OK Co-op thing. They don't want to be insular. "What we found ourselves doing most of the time was creating presentations to explain why this would benefit the community, and why you need to have a certain amount of tourism in your economic development program," he said.

**...AND FOR PEOPLE
EXPERIENCING THE CHANGE
THEY'RE MAKING**

Smith's advice to leaders in other communities would be to trust people. For example, a local banker in his 60s asked West OK Co-op to paint a mural for him. He told Smith he wanted to give the artists the freedom to do what they wanted, but he was concerned about whether the artists would venture into risky territory. Smith said the artists never gave the impression that they couldn't be appropriate, but there is often a fear that comes with giving up artistic control.



Andrew Stone at the groundbreaking for the Hydro bridge project, flanked by his parents, David and Christina Stone. Photo courtesy Old Pal Advertising from a profile of Stone at <https://www.cowtownokc.com/andrew-stone>.

Threatt filling station a safe haven during Jim Crow days

Threatt family members and Route 66 supporters gathered outside the Threatt filling station¹⁰⁵ near Luther, Oklahoma, in August 2025 to celebrate its new Route 66 Monument sign. Just four years earlier, in 2021, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named the Threatt station to its list of most endangered historic places.¹⁰⁶ Now the family is moving even closer to reopening the station to tell the family's history and the story of travel for Black Americans during the era of Jim Crow laws,¹⁰⁷ which enforced racial segregation. The new Route 66 Centennial Monument¹⁰⁸ is one of dozens placed at important points all along Route 66.



Members of the Threatt family gather by the new Route 66 Monument sign, marking the only known Black-owned filling station on Route 66 during Jim Crow, which lasted through the mid-1950s. Photo by Rhys Martin.

¹⁰⁵ "The Threatt Filling Station: A Historically African American-owned Property," Threatt Filling Station Foundation. <https://threattfilling-station.org/>

¹⁰⁶ "Discover America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places for 2021," National Trust for Historic Preservation, June 3, 2021. <https://savingplaces.org/stories/11-most-endangered-historic-places-2021#.YLjEIZNKh-s>

¹⁰⁷ "Jim Crow law: United States [1877-1954]," Britannica, August 29, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Jim-Crow-law>

¹⁰⁸ "Make Your Mark on the Mother Road," The Route 66 Centennial Monument Project. <https://route66monuments.com/>

In the early 1900s, the Threatt family farmed 150 acres outside Luther. The filling station they built in 1915 was the only known Black-owned and -operated gas station along Route 66 during Jim Crow, which lasted from the 1870s through the mid-1950s. At a time when travel for Black Americans could be dangerous,¹⁰⁹ the station was a safe haven.

In an interview with the National Trust for Historic Preservation,¹¹⁰ David Threatt said, “The station is physically located between two sundown towns, what were sundown towns at the time. People of color traveling Route 66 couldn’t stay in the hotels in those cities. They couldn’t go into the restaurants and so forth. People would come to the station, they’d pull around behind the station because they knew they could be safe there and actually spend the night in their vehicle and then be able to get up the next morning, use the facilities, [and] get some gas.” David Threatt is grandson of the founder, Allen Threatt, Sr. The family expanded the operation to include an outdoor stage, a bar, and a ballfield where they held Negro League baseball games.

In 2023, the National Trust’s HOPE (Hands-On Preservation Experience) Crew, with students from Guthrie (Okla.) Job Corps, stepped in to help preserve the station. They spent two weeks onsite to restore the “giraffe stone” masonry and complete exterior painting on the 1933 building, which replaced the original 1915 structure after a fire.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ For more about travel during Jim Crow, see *Overground Railroad: The Green Book and the Roots of Black Travel in America*, by Candacy Taylor, Adams Press, New York, 2020. Chapter 8 is “The Roots of Route 66: Why Black People Aren’t Nostalgic About the Nation’s Favorite Highway,” pages 200-245.

¹¹⁰ “Threatt Filling Station: ‘Grandpa Would Be Proud...Because We Didn’t Give Up,’” National Trust for Historic Preservation, September 19, 2023. <https://savingplaces.org/stories/preserving-the-legacy-of-the-threatt-filling-station>

¹¹¹ To watch the restoration happening, check out this report by CBS Saturday Morning: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/family-preservationists-work-to-rescue-endangered-safe-haven-along-route-66/>

Vanessa Morrison took students on a site visit to Luther in 2024, where they met with Threatt family members and heard their stories. Morrison is professor of practice at the Christopher C. Gibbs College of Architecture at the University of Oklahoma. The station “was an inclusive space, a safe haven for Black travelers, but it was open to any and everyone who wanted to come and be a part of that community,” Morrison said. “Family members talked about weekend evenings where hundreds of people would show up for dances and gatherings.”

The Threatt family has owned the property, including all 150 acres, for well over a century. “That the Threatt family has been able to hold on to the property for all these years and have done so much work to preserve it was amazing for students to see,” Morrison said. It was an important lesson on the grassroots nature of preserving history. “It’s your family, it’s the elders,” she said, “it’s your community residents who just want to do what they can to protect their spaces and to bring life into their community.”



The National Trust’s HOPE Crew spent two weeks onsite to restore the “giraffe stone” masonry and complete exterior painting on the 1933 filling station.

Clinton: Encourage the volunteers. They bring passion, skill and pride to byways.

The Round Barn of Arcadia is an emblem of Route 66 and a testimony to the power of volunteers. The barn was built by Arcadia's co-founder in 1898 using native burr oak boards that were soaked and shaped into curves for the walls and rafters. The story goes that he thought a tornado would bounce off a round barn instead of destroying it, like it would a normal barn.¹¹²

By the time the barn was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1977 it was falling apart, the result of arsonists, vandals and time. In the late 1980s, the private owner donated the barn to the Arcadia Historical Society. Just a month later, the massive domed roof “just kind of sighed and fell in, like a soufflé,” according to an eyewitness.¹¹³

The story of the round barn was not over. Led by Luke Robison, a retired carpenter, an army of volunteers spent thousands of hours rebuilding. The group, many of them retirees, dubbed itself the “Over-the-Hill Gang.” The restored barn was dedicated April 4, 1992.

The story of the Round Barn of Arcadia and many other attractions shows how close the nation came to losing so much of what makes Route 66 special, which is what draws visitors and builds economic development in small towns along the byway.

These treasures live on because of people like the Friends of the Coleman Theatre in Miami and the Over-the-Hill Gang in Arcadia. Volunteers in other towns and along other byways have restored



¹¹² “Arcadia Round Barn marks the 30th anniversary of its restoration this weekend,” *Route 66 News*. <https://www.route66news.com/2022/04/08/arcadia-round-barn-marks-the-30th-anniversary-of-its-restoration-this-weekend/>

¹¹³ “The Round Barn: Arcadia, OK,” *The Active Historian*, July 21, 2021. <https://theactivehistorian.com/2021/07/21/the-round-barn-arcadia-ok/>



A father and son from Beijing, China, pause during a motorcycle trip across Route 66 to visit the Round Barn of Arcadia.

old buildings, cleared paths for walking and biking, held festivals, raised money, planted flowers, served as tour guides, applied for grants and engaged their communities.

Their time is worth money. According to Independent Sector, an hour of volunteer time in Oklahoma in 2024 was valued at \$30.63¹¹⁴ and the national value of a volunteer hour was \$34.79.¹¹⁵ Recognizing volunteer contributions builds enthusiasm and encourages more people to volunteer.

OKLAHOMA ROUTE 66 HALL OF FAME IN CLINTON HONORS VOLUNTEERS

¹¹⁴ "Value of Volunteer Time by State (2014-2024), Independent Sector. <https://independentsector.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/vovt-state-by-state-data-2025.pdf>

¹¹⁵ "Value of Volunteer Time: Current Estimated National Value of Each Volunteer Hour," Independent Sector. <https://independentsector.org/research/value-of-volunteer-time/>

Luke Robison, who died in 1997, was inducted into the Oklahoma Route 66 Hall of Fame¹¹⁶ in 2008. Every other year, the Oklahoma Route 66 Association inducts two people, one living and one deceased, who have made outstanding contributions to the promotion or preservation of Route 66. Only one other state, Illinois, has a Route 66 hall of fame.

Oklahoma's hall of fame is located at the Oklahoma Route 66 Museum in Clinton, the largest museum dedicated to the complete, eight-state history of Route 66. While the museum is an Oklahoma state entity, it is self-funded through admissions and the gift shop.

Asked if there was an intention behind honoring people, Pat Smith¹¹⁷ said, "I just think it's great

¹¹⁶ <https://oklahomaroute66.com/hall-of-fame>

¹¹⁷ Route magazine (<https://www.routemagazine.us/>) released a profile of Pat Smith and the story of how the Oklahoma Route 66 Museum came to be in 2022: https://kansascityfed.org/documents/11429/Pat_Smith_-_Route_magazine_2022.pdf



The Oklahoma Route 66 Museum bought this 1956 Valentine diner from owners in Shamrock, Texas, in 2002, restored it and placed it on the museum grounds.

memories that they have of these different individuals” that leads people to want to honor them.

The honorees are not the usual stuffed shirts, either. A sampling: Jerry McClanahan, the author of the *EZ-66 Guide for Travelers*; Allen Threath Sr., founder of the Threath Service Station in Luther, the first Black owned-and-operated station on Route 66; Annabelle and Harley Russell, the Mediocre Music Makers from Erick; Melvena Heisch, deputy director of the Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office; Lucille Hamons, the “mother of the Mother Road,” known for her kindness as she served travelers at her service station in Hydro; and Ken Ruth, who documented nearly 500 sites for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

FROM BEING A VOLUNTEER TO ENCOURAGING VOLUNTEERS

Rhys Martin is making a difference, one in a long line of volunteers who poured their passion and time into Route 66. While Martin began as a guy handing out Oklahoma Route 66 travel guides, over time other leaders have encouraged him to take on new leadership roles. Now, Martin is an encouraging, energizing presence for volunteers across eight states.

It started when Martin had a quarter-life crisis. In his late 20s, Martin worked in middle management, bought a house, got married. He checked the boxes to call himself a grown-up, but he was not happy. He went to work and he came home. He didn’t travel. He had no hobbies. “I was in a very small box,” he said. “I had adopted all these dreams, but they weren’t mine.” It was time to reset.



The museum offers a comprehensive look at Route 66 through the decades, including the 1960s.



His dad's 2005 black Mustang has become Martin's road warrior companion.

AFTER BACKPACKING IN EUROPE AND ASIA, HE RETURNED HOME TO TULSA

Martin sold his possessions and quit his job. He and his wife backpacked in Europe and Asia for 10 months. "I realized when I got home," he said, "it was less about finding myself and more about being comfortable with who I already was." The couple traveled well together, but the trip changed them both and they parted company. Martin wanted to start over.

Although he never expected to return to Tulsa, his family was there. It was a good place to regroup. He took a new love of travel and a passion for photography home with him.

INHERITED MUSTANG KEEPS HIM CONNECTED TO HIS DAD

Less than a year later, in 2011, Martin's world was shattered when his father died unexpectedly. He inherited his dad's 2005 black Mustang with just one payment left on it. "I thought, am I going to put it in the garage and polish it or am I going to drive it?" he said. "This is the only way I can spend time with my dad now, so I'm going to drive it."

Martin's first trip on Route 66, in 2013, was a short one. He drove up to Miami to see the Coleman Theatre. "It blew me away," he said. "What is this amazing vaudeville-era theater doing in this little town? It has no business being here, as ornate and expensive as it was to build." He wondered what else was on

the highway. Over the next two years, he drove all of Route 66. The Mustang has 235,000 miles on it now and he calls it his road warrior companion.

IT ALL STARTS WITH RAISING YOUR HAND

As he traveled, Martin met business owners and advocates along Route 66. “I raised my hand and said, ‘How can I help?’” It started small, passing out travel guides, a little public speaking. Then, before the group’s president left, he told Martin, “You’d be really good at this.” Martin’s move into leadership felt gradual. It surprises him to realize how far he’s come.

In 2016, he joined the Tulsa Route 66 Commission. In 2017, he joined the Oklahoma Route 66 Association representing Tulsa County and two years later became president. In 2019, he joined the board of Route 66: The Road Ahead Initiative. In July of 2024, the National Trust for Historic Preservation hired him as the full-time manager of the Preserve Route 66 Initiative – the first time he was paid to work on Route 66.

CONNECTING PEOPLE TO GET THINGS DONE

Martin says he’s like an old car. “I don’t idle very well.” He feels a sense of urgency and often questions



Rhys Martin and the mural painted in 2025 outside the Oklahoma Route 66 Association office on the Mother Road in Tulsa.



whether he's accomplishing anything or just spinning his wheels. You'd never know it. He comes across quite laid back, with shaggy brown hair, a goatee and glasses. He is genuine and straightforward and seemingly tireless. He enjoys the role of connector, connecting others to get things done.

RESOURCE

Oklahoma Route 66 Association website

The website is where you can order a free Oklahoma Route 66 trip guide, learn about the history as well as the latest news, and gain access to helpful resources. For example, the website has a tutorial on how to travel Route 66¹¹⁸ that explains all the things to you.

<https://oklahomaroute66.com/>

When you talk to anyone involved in Route 66 in Oklahoma, they are quick to praise Martin and his leadership. Martin says his philosophy comes from his dad, a traditional man who worked in the grocery industry his whole life. "It's things like, look someone in the eyes when you shake their hand," Martin said. "And if you give someone your word, don't break it." He also relies on training from his professional career, which involved leading teams. It taught him skills like collaboration and the value of assuming positive intent.

Showing up is a vital part of the symbolic role of association president. He recently drove from Tulsa to Elk City in western Oklahoma for a ribbon cutting. The city was opening a miniature golf course with a new Route 66 theme. "It feels good to say, I drove

¹¹⁸ "Finding Your Way," Oklahoma Route 66 Association.
<https://oklahomaroute66.com/finding-your-way>



The Dairy King in Commerce, Okla., has been serving treats to travelers for decades.

out here to this, for you, for what you're doing," Martin said. "It's important."

It isn't the abstract idea of Route 66 that energizes Martin; he's here for the people who keep it alive. He talks about the mom-and-pop businesses like the Dairy King in Commerce that just recently started taking credit cards and how important it is to meet people where they are. "It's about having a servant's heart, coming at this with a desire to help others," he said.

He is encouraged that younger travelers are seeking authentic experiences so central to Route 66. The history of Route 66 is still being written, he said. "I like to tell people the centennial is about the next hundred years."

El Reno visitor center benefits travelers and local residents

The first travelers to enter the new El Reno visitor's center when it opened in May 2025 show why these centers are so vital. "They were a nice couple from Ireland," Becky Riggs said. "They flew to Chicago and rented a car. They were very confused, because Google Maps had them on I-40 since they left O'Hare." When the couple asked, "Did we miss anything?" Becky shared maps and explained how the Route 66 signage worked so they would be able to experience the old road.



Once used for storage, this mid-century fuel station is now the El Reno visitor's center, thanks to a \$1,200,000 Oklahoma Route 66 Revitalization Grant.



Becky Riggs helps tourists navigate Route 66 from the El Reno visitor center.

The City of El Reno won an Oklahoma Route 66 Revitalization Grant of more than \$1,200,000 to renovate a mid-century fuel station and turn it into a Convention and Visitor's Bureau office and visitor's center. The site, which any traveler headed west on Route 66 passes by, includes a hot-rod museum with rotating vehicle displays as well as a mural painted by an El Reno artist. At the time, the station was being used as storage for a random assortment of cars and motorhomes.

Lindsay Bayne is a fourth-generation resident of El Reno, and serves as the city's public information and marketing manager. She says while Route 66 travelers come from all over the world, the filling station is important to people who live in El Reno, as well. "We're going to have town hall meetings here," she said. "We will make a birthday party package for kids. We had a field trip of 38 kids just the other day."

America shifts from east to west just past Oklahoma City

I'm headed west on Route 66 around Chandler, just east of Oklahoma City. It rained last night. I roll into a valley and suddenly, the wet road is crowded with big, meaty red clumps of ...dirt? Is dirt supposed to look like this?

Evidently it is.

This is my first experience with Oklahoma's state soil, port silt loam. The intense red color is basically rust, the result of iron and oxidation.¹¹⁹ It is vivid.

This dirt gave the state its name – okla means “people” and humma means “red” in the Choctaw language. “Red Dirt” is how Oklahomans claim something uniquely Oklahoman, such as its Red

¹¹⁹ “Soil Science,” *AG Oklahoma: AG in the Classroom*. <https://oklahoma.agclassroom.org/lessons/other-categories/soil/>

Dirt music, with storytelling lyrics rooted in rural life and landscapes.¹²⁰

Sixty miles west of Chandler, near El Reno, the landscape transitions rapidly from east to west. The sky expands until I can see the curve of the horizon. Cowboys patrol on horseback in a field off to the left, surrounded by bored-looking cows. Trees thin out – the semi-arid climate can't support them. People thin out, too. Eastern Oklahoma is more densely populated with larger cities closer

¹²⁰ *Red Dirt playlist, Volt.fm*. <https://volt.fm/genre/4415/red-dirt>





Oklahoma's red dirt cakes cars and trucks in mid-Oklahoma.

together, but out west, towns are small and miles apart.¹²¹

In western Oklahoma, officials lobbied successfully to position I-40 close to Route 66. This meant that

¹²¹ "Environment and Cultural Ecology," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, Oklahoma Historical Society. <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=EN007>

towns were less stranded than if the interstate were miles away.

It makes for a stark contrast. To the left, the interstate. Four lanes, big trucks, wide shoulders and a steady flow of traffic going 75 or 80 miles an hour. To the right, storied Route 66. On the slender ribbon of highway, grass overgrowing the edge lines, there is, well, me. Occasionally I encounter a motorcycle or pick-up truck, but I've gone miles with no company at all.

I look over at the interstate and wonder what it must have been like to have even half that traffic on these two lanes. People who lived it describe it as "zoom, zoom, zoom," so busy you couldn't cross the street.

But not today. Today is quiet. Solitary. I shift my gaze to the right so all I see are fields stretching into the distance.



Sayre: Even a little support can make a huge difference

It's Monday morning at the Gallery@112 in downtown Sayre,¹²² Oklahoma, about 25 miles from the Texas border. Today there's bright sunshine but two nights ago residents dove into their cellars during a tornado alert. The windows above the gallery's front door blew out into the street during the storm, an indicator of tornadic winds. A city crew is installing a stretch of new windows.



A workman replaces the Gallery@112 window blown out by tornadic winds.

When Suzanne Hylton first heard the state had grants available for revitalization projects across Route 66, she started to envision what a Sayre monument might include. Hylton is president of River's Edge Arts Society, which operates Gallery@112. Of this she was certain: No giants. No neon. She needed something that could hold its own out here in this weather.

But first she had to convince herself it was worth applying. "Nobody ever pays attention to western Oklahoma," Hylton said. "Tulsa and Oklahoma City get everything. I said, there's no sense to me even trying."

Hylton's husband is city manager of Sayre, with a population of about 5,000. He took the position in 2011 after serving as city manager of Elk City, population around 12,000, where Suzanne owned and operated a retail florist shop and raised their three children. They enjoy the slower pace of life in Sayre, she said.

¹²² "Sayre," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, Oklahoma Historical Society. <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=SA027>

KNOWING THE RIGHT QUESTION TO ASK HELPS ENERGIZE LOCAL ARTISTS

When Hylton arrived in Sayre in 2011, she found few arts opportunities. The arts, she knew, can play a significant role in mental, physical and spiritual health. Hylton was a recent graduate of the Leadership Arts program of the Oklahoma Arts Council. The program teaches participants about the role of the arts in economic development and quality of life and equips them to be advocates for the arts in their communities.¹²³

Hylton is plain-spoken and organized. She is the person they mean when they say, if you want to get something done, ask a busy person to do it. She is positive in a low-key, non-bubbly sort of way. And, in the same manner as the entrepreneurs in Miami, the Chenoweths, Hylton listened to her market before moving forward.

She reached out to locals working in music and theater. “I told them that I think there’s talent here and everybody agreed,” Hylton said. Sayre residents often went to Elk City to be in plays and music performances.

But it was the visual artists who were most starved for attention. “I asked, how many of you have your art stored under your bed?” Hylton said. Many raised their hands. “And I said, how would you like to have a place where you could actually sell it and, oh, they were excited about that.”

In 2012, a group led by Hylton started the Rivers Edge Arts Society, a 501c3 nonprofit with the mission of promoting the arts of all genres, art education and arts tourism.

¹²³ “Leadership Arts,” Oklahoma Arts Council. https://arts.ok.gov/Our_Programs/Leadership_Arts.html



Suzanne Hylton outside the Gallery@112.

CITY SEES THEIR MISSION AS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Their first step: Secure a space to hold classes and sell art. “City officials saw our efforts and mission as economic development,” Hylton said. “They offered us an empty building downtown on Route 66 to fix up.” She credits inmates from a local inmate work center, now closed, for doing a great job remodeling the space. The prison program taught construction skills the inmates could use after incarceration for paid employment, and the Gallery@112 provided real-life experience.

Promoting the arts was not part of anybody’s game plan in Sayre. “It was all about rodeos and everything Western, like barbecues and street dances and that kind of thing,” Hylton said. “But we kept with it.” The gallery sponsored jazz concerts. They’d open the front doors and let the music flow out into the street, which drew a fair crowd. They have a local theater group that does Pop-Up Theater in the Gallery@112 space, and the gallery holds stained glass, barn quilt and group paint classes.

BYWAY PLAYS A MAJOR ROLE IN THE SUCCESS OF GALLERY@112

Sayre was founded in 1901. More than a century later, in 2002, its entire downtown district was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The street is quiet today, but during the heyday of Route 66 the traffic was so fast and constant that the town built an underground walkway at 4th and Elm Streets so pedestrians could survive crossing the street.^{124, 125}

“The fact that we were situated right on Route 66 and I-40 became a key factor in our success and growth,” Hylton said. “We wanted to expand arts opportunities for local residents, but we also saw we could catch the attention and tourism dollars of people passing through.”



Artists sell their work in the Gallery@112. About 25% of sales are to people traveling on Route 66, including international travelers.

¹²⁴ “Sayre, Oklahoma - Entering Cowboy Country,” *Legends of America*, February 2024. <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/ok-sayre/>

¹²⁵ “Route 66 Pedestrian Tunnels,” *Route 66 Road Trip*. <https://www.route66roadtrip.com/route-66-pedestrian-tunnels.htm#:~:text=Route%2066%20Pedestrian%20Tunnel%20in%20Sayre%2C%20Oklahoma,as%20a%20severe%20weather%20shelter.>

Hylton calculates that 50% of sales are to people from Elk City, 25% to Sayre residents, and 25% to people traveling on Route 66. The store sells a mix of art – from oil paintings and prints to turned bowls and cutting boards – as well as Route 66 souvenirs. Hylton tells travelers about places to eat, spots to spend the night, and fun side trips. She asks them where they’re from and they compare towns. “Some of them, we have a little difficulty with language,” she said, “but it’s still fun. We can still make out.”

PASSPORT PROGRAM GIVES PEOPLE A REASON TO GET OUT ON THE ROAD, STOP AND VISIT

Oklahoma’s Route 66 Passport¹²⁶ has increased the number of people stopping in tiny Sayre, Hylton said. Travelers can download the passport in the TravelOK Trip Planner app, request a free paper passport from the Travel Oklahoma website,¹²⁷ or pick one up at tourism information centers. The passport divides the state into three sections: eastern, central and western. Travelers show the passport at stops along the way to earn stamps. When they complete a section, travelers get a magnet. When they complete all three sections, they get a Route 66 coin.

“We pay a fee to be listed in the book, and it has been worth every dime,” Hylton said. “It’s great to see how many people, especially families, take part in this. Many say they would have never come to Sayre if it weren’t for the passport.” The Oklahoma Tourism & Recreation department produces the passports, which are free.

Along with providing a fun way to guide and track progress along Route 66 for people doing the whole

¹²⁶ “The Official Oklahoma Route 66 Passport,” *Travel Oklahoma*. <https://www.travelok.com/articles/oklahoma-route-66-passport>

¹²⁷ *Oklahoma Travel Brochures*, *Travel Oklahoma*. https://www.travelok.com/brochures/related_article.oklahoma-route-66-passport



The Gallery@112 invited businesses to sponsor barn quilts hung on walls in downtown Sayre.

multi-state route, the Oklahoma passport lures families who live in the state out on the road. “People from the southern part of the state get the passport and say, we have a weekend off, let’s get in the car and we’ll get our stamps done,” Hylton said. “It’s really helped get people moving.”

STATE ASSISTANCE IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT DURING TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES

Since the state began producing the passport, the Gallery@112 has seen an increase in souvenir sales and sales by vendor artists. Help from the state is especially important during the kind of economic downturn Sayre has faced. Since Gallery@112 opened, Sayre has lost the oilfield, the private prison and the local hospital.

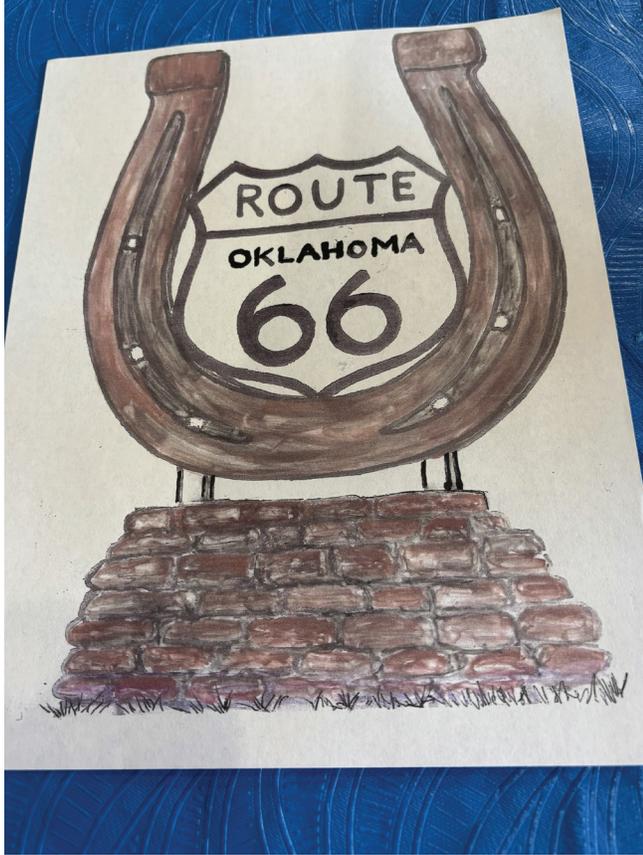
Many people who visit Sayre love the quaint, historic downtown, and there is room for more renovation and development. But there are challenges. The Gallery@112 is one of a strip of spaces along old

Route 66. Some of the storefronts appear empty, but they’re not, Hylton said. Older residents are using them as storage space. Because they don’t want to find another spot to store their items the space is unavailable for a new business. Other properties connected with Route 66 have been inherited by out-of-town relatives who don’t fix them up. Some property owners hold on to properties, saying they expect to cash in on the connection to Route 66.

HYLTON DECIDES TO SUBMIT A PROPOSAL

Hylton checked to see who won the first round of Route 66 Revitalization Grants and saw it included “a lot of little towns that had some things they were going to do,” she said. Erick, a town even farther west, got \$35,000 to redo an old motel sign. “The motel is not even open, it’s just the sign,” Hylton said. “I thought, well, heck, if they can get money for that, then I’m going to try.”

She had been toying with the idea for a sculpture for some time. It was a huge Route 66 shield inside



of a horseshoe, signifying Sayre's Western culture, with ranches and quarter horse farms. She showed it around and got a good response.

A local sculptor helped with a plan. It would be 30 feet tall, with a red rock base. The design included two 35-foot pipes that would hold the sculpture together and keep it firmly anchored into the ground, no matter what the western Oklahoma weather threw at it. They agreed the best place for it was the WPA park on Route 66, where, in the old days, people would camp before the next leg of their trip, to Amarillo.

Hylton started writing. The proposal asked many questions. How is this going to help your town? Is this going to boost sales tax revenue? How can you use this to draw people into your town? Once she completed her draft, she had several people review the proposal, then she submitted it for the third round of grants.

THEY WOULD ANNOUNCE THE WINNERS ON DEADLINE DAY

The day the Oklahoma Route 66 Commission met to choose grant recipients, Hylton stayed at the Gallery@112 all day. By 4 p.m. she hadn't heard anything. No calls. No emails. "I think, well, that's it," Hylton said. She turned off the lights and headed for the door. Then the phone rang. "The woman said, 'Congratulations! You've won one of the Route 66 Revitalization Grants!'" Hylton said. "I didn't believe her."

COMMEMORATING THE DUST BOWL IS SAYRE'S LARGEST PUBLIC EVENT

Hylton's friend, Kay Allen, drops by the Gallery@112 for a visit. Allen comes from people who survived the Dust Bowl, and she and some friends decided Sayre needed a Dust Bowl festival. "Call it something else," Hylton told Allen, but she lost that argument.

Allen said she got a lot of questions the first year. "Why the title 'Dust Bowl'? Why do you want to name a festival after a terrible time in history?" people asked her. The small group of organizers wanted to bring attention to the farming and ranching industry, as well as honor those families who stayed. "We have many, many generational farmers out in the rural areas who are literally on the same land that was destroyed by the Dust Bowl," Allen said.

Black Sunday, when a huge wall of black dust turned day into night, happened 90 years ago, on April 14, 1935.¹²⁸ Some farmers were forced off their land by foreclosure. "The ones that stayed, they learned," Allen said. "They spent so much time figuring out how to never let this happen again."

¹²⁸ "Black Sunday Dust Storm of April 14, 1935," National Weather Service. <https://www.weather.gov/oun/events-19350414>

The festival Allen and her friends launched in Sayre, Dust Bowl Days, celebrates the love of the land that kept farmers in Oklahoma while the dust and drought raged. “You find the people who love the land, and it’s everything that goes with it. It’s preserving the water. It’s fighting the grasshoppers. It’s growing healthy wheat.”

Sayre celebrated its fifth Dust Bowl Days festival in July 2025. “We still have people question us,” Allen said, “but not as much.” The organizers incorporated as an educational nonprofit. Children’s activities show what Sayre was like in those days. For adults, the Oklahoma Historical Society shares the history of the Dust Bowl, how it evolved, and how it took years to renew the ground and make it productive again. The festival drew 800 people downtown and 1,750 to its Wild Plum Jam concert.¹²⁹

IGNORE NAYSAYERS AND BE CREATIVE

In small towns, economic development often looks like one person with a passion project who engages

others and moves the project forward. Hylton’s biggest worry is finding someone to take over her role after the centennial. She’s 80 and her husband will retire soon.

When asked for her advice on how to get things done in other small towns, Hylton stressed focusing on the positive. “Ignore local negativity and think outside the box to what your town could become in the next ten or 20 years,” she said. Focus on the advantages, not the disadvantages of small town life. Think of all the things that might draw your adult children back home. “A positive attitude is so important,” she said. “Most everyone is ready to complain about something but if they can refocus and downplay the negativity and emphasize the good, attitudes can change.”

Have a goal and a purpose. Don’t just get together to talk. Have a vision of where the group is going and why it’s meeting. Find people who share your passion. If someone throws up a roadblock, she said, find other ways to achieve your goals.



¹²⁹ “Dust Bowl Days Festival celebrates homesteading.” *The Beckham County Record*, August 2, 2025. <https://www.beckhamcountyrecord.net/article/3142,dust-bowl-days-festival-celebrates-homesteading>

Suzanne Hylton and Kay Allen talk at the Gallery@112.

Conclusion

To quote Michael Wallis, author of “Route 66: The Mother Road,” “Life begins at the off-ramp.” Off the interstate, on the backroads, small towns beckon. No matter how small the town is, it is guaranteed to be a treasured part of someone’s journey.

Stories from Route 66 in Oklahoma, Willa Cather country in Nebraska, and the Crooked Road Music Trail in Virginia show what is possible when tourism is linked to economic development in small communities.

First, small towns must appreciate what they can offer to travelers. If this report sparks anything, we hope it is the catalyst for a new, appreciative look at the history, beauty, culture and people in America’s small towns.

No matter what your position, there is a role for you here. Stories show how state officials, elected leaders, entrepreneurs, artisans, and passionate residents have stepped up. The advice shared by these individuals offers wisdom, and the resources included here offer information you can use to build an exciting new journey.





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