

A Native Take On Route 66

New appreciation of an historic road BY ALYSA LANDRY

Bottom Line: *The fabled Route 66 has inspired authors, musicians, artists and a television show. Now it has inspired a guidebook about its indigenous denizens.*

Route 66, stretching 2,400 miles from Chicago to Los Angeles, is known for its greasy diners, artsy roadside attractions, wide-finned Cadillacs and kitschy souvenirs.

One of the original roads in the U.S. Highway System, Route 66 has been replaced by interstates and is now categorized as a National Scenic Byway. Because of federal revitalization efforts, sites along the route—often marked by neon signs or historic plaques—continue to be destinations for tourists seeking a peek at the past.

But there are other stories about Route 66 that are missing from the popular narrative. These are the stories told by the nearly 30 tribes with homes along the road and connections to chapters in U.S. history that included the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, mass migration westward, and an economy that blossomed almost overnight along the thoroughfare.

A new initiative by the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association (AIANTA) and backed by the National Park Service aims to add that Native voice. The \$50,000 grant-funded project will produce a guidebook that highlights significant tribal sites along the route and shares stories of how Natives were affected by traffic and commerce.

“We’re working to give character to the route,” said Virginia Salazar-Halfmoon, public lands partnership coordinator for AIANTA and project lead for the Route 66 endeavor. “Before now, the information and publicity have been the Hollywood version, the stereotyping,

the war bonnets.”

Tourists who stop at roadside attractions still see cement teepees and sometimes expect Indians to wear feathered headdresses. The Route 66 project, which includes a website presence, hopes to demolish those myths.

“What we want to do is put a face on tribal nations that are separate and distinct, and give them an opportunity to say what Route 66 meant to them,” said Salazar-Halfmoon. “We also want to offer an authentic opportunity for people

precisely because of government actions.

Significant populations of urban Natives live at both ends of Route 66, in Illinois and California. Salazar-Halfmoon wants the guidebook to shed light on how those populations got there.

“There are more urban Indian people in cities than on all the reservations combined,” she said. “I think that’s a symbol that the efforts of assimilation did not succeed and the people in urban areas are examples of resilience in terms of maintaining identity.”

Perhaps the most personal part of the project is the stories of individuals with ties to America’s Mother Road. Some of them come from people like 73-year-old Mary Lowden, of New Mexico’s Acoma Pueblo. She recalls walking to Route 66 in the 1950s to sell pottery from roadside stands.

“We would walk to the highway in the morning then come home before it got dark,” she said. “We took a lunch, sat around and visited with tourists who asked us if we were really Native.”

Lowden stopped selling pottery in her early teens when she went to boarding school in Albuquerque. “Grandma said, ‘No more selling pottery.’ We were shipped to boarding school because there were too many boys who stopped on the highway to see us.”

When the government widened Route 66 and installed rest stops, the roadside pottery business disappeared, Lowden recalled. No physical evidence remains of those roadside stands. But Lowden retained her memories, and when she turned 66, she bought herself a T-shirt with the Route 66 logo on it.

“It was fun growing up there,” she said. “I wanted to be forever 66.” <http://bit.ly/1Cvlp1C> 



There is more to Route 66 than long stretches and Native clichés.

who want to travel the route.”

The authentic story replaces the stereotypical images with truths about how the road affected individuals and entire tribes. These are stories about how the federal government used Route 66 in the Indian relocation program of the 1950s and the migration of children to Indian boarding schools. Other tribes tell stories of dirt paths that Indians used for generations before the government paved them over and dubbed the result a highway.

Salazar-Halfmoon envisions the guidebook as a resource that will identify tribal nations by name and include background, traditional languages and locations of the tribes today. In many cases, tribes no longer exist along the route—