

The 100th Birthday of the Mother Road in 2026

by Gordene MacKenzie, Los Ranchos Historical Society

Route 66, often called the most famous highway in America, has captured the imagination of numerous travelers. It is “a highway of dreams both realized and lost.”

Launched in 1926, Route 66 became “America’s Main Street” that wove through unpaved rural towns and big cities. It stretched from the Midwest to California crossing 8 states including Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. The road also cut through small sections of other states. Not all travelers on Route 66 were tourists in gas guzzling cars. Some were former farmers and others who lost everything during the dustbowl and depression and hoped to find a promised land to rebuild their shattered lives. World War II troops trained along the Mother Road. And non-white travelers were all too often refused transportation, food and lodging along the way.

New Mexico once was known for having the longest mileage of any state along old Route 66. Route 66 stretched across the Land of Enchantment for 507 miles. Later funding for road alignments shortened the road. Historically, New Mexico also held the distinction of having the highest point at 7200 feet along the Continental Divide on the old east-west part of Route 66 that passed through Gallup. Driving through New Mexico many tourists met Native people for the first time. A member of Laguna Pueblo recalled some visitors from the East asking why they didn’t live in teepees or carry tomahawks!

From 1926 to 1937, North Fourth Street in Los Ranchos became part of the north-south U.S. Route 66, which extended from Albuquerque to Santa Fe. Driving South from Santa Fe today on I-25 you can see road signs emblazoned with Historic Route 66/pre-alignment 1937 near the exits. Parts of old Route 66 are now incorporated into NM Highway 313 and U.S. Highway 85, still drivable today.

Route 66 played a significant role in shaping history and identity not only in Los Ranchos but also in numerous communities throughout New Mexico and



across the United States. The upcoming Route 66 Centennial Anniversary in 2026 is a historic opportunity to recognize and honor the contributions of our Los Ranchos community, businesses, and individuals along this historic route 66.

The current 4th street commercial district in Los Ranchos is built along old Route 66. But traces of the Mother Road remain. The El Camino Motor Hotel and the El Camino Dining Room constructed in the 1940’s and early 1950s are significant historic and architectural landmarks known for their pueblo revival architecture and marked by large once lit neon signs that served as beacons for travelers in search of food and lodging. People still travelled old Route 66 until the Interstate was built in the late 50s and early 60s.

Over the last 20 years there has been an intense revival of interest in Route 66 led by historians, archeologists, and pop culture preservationists. Some have mapped unique markers in NM like the large Route 66 collage arch in Grants, and the ¼ mile musical highway near Tijeras NM, which, when driven, plays America the Beautiful.

To celebrate the 100th Birthday of Route 66 in 2026, the Los Ranchos Historical Society in collaboration with Historic Albuquerque, the East Mountain Historical Society, libraries, and other organizations are sponsoring a series of FREE rotating monthly talks on different aspects of Route 66 in New Mexico. The talks will be held on the 4th Saturday of the month from January to November 2026 in the Raymond Sanchez Community Center at 11:00 AM. Each month will feature a different speaker including two speakers on different dates from Los Ranchos. For more information, visit [Route66HistoryTalks](#) on Facebook or www.losranchoshistoricalsociety.org.

HELP US OUT!

Share your stories and photos of Route 66 (we can scan them at your home or ours) with the Los Ranchos Historical Society. Contact us at (978) 578.6297 or through our website at www.losranchoshistoricalsociety.org