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Roadside America

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Amarillo Car Culture and Route 66: A Research Paper on the Effects of Route 66 on Amarillo
Car Culture and Infrastructure

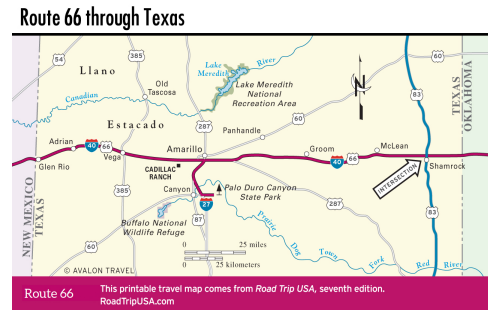
Route 66 is widely known for its prevalence in American history. When Route 66 was built in Amarillo in 1926, it opened the city to new people and ideas. This embrace of community was felt by all of the cities and towns along Route 66 with attractions like The World's Tallest Thermometer in Baker, California, The Gemini Giant in Wilmington, Illinois, or Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo, Texas. While all of these places are known now for their relevance to the automotive culture, they did not always have a car-centric culture. Amarillo, however, has always been dependent on cars and the independence that they provide. The use of cars "signified modernity by facilitating commerce and mobility on the flat, landlocked plains" of Amarillo (Ingrassia 62). Because of their reliance on automobiles before the creation of Route 66, native Amarilloans adapted quickly to the new highway. Though Route 66 was simply an addition to the prevalent car culture in Amarillo, it created a new subculture in Amarillo, changed the infrastructure that previously existed, and led to new people and diversity.

The subculture of Route 66 in Amarillo car culture acts as an expression of the individuality that Amarillo has. One of the greatest examples of the car culture surrounding



Route 66 is the famed Cadillac Ranch. Cadillac Ranch was established in 1974 with ten older Cadillacs buried with their noses down in a field just a few miles from

Route 66. Cadillac Ranch is esteemed as "The hood ornament of Route 66" (Dingus). Although the original Route 66 has been replaced by Interstate 40, Cadillac Ranch is still known as an attraction on the historic Route 66. Though it started as just an art attraction to observe, it quickly became an interactive art installation with visitors spray painting the bodies of the Cadillacs. Because of this popularity, the culture of Route 66 continues to permeate Amarillo beyond the presence of the original highway. In some places, namely Miami, Oklahoma, the culture of Route 66 does not exist without the original road, because it has been fully rerouted with new highways. Because the original Route 66 is still acting as a functional highway, just under a different name, the Route 66 culture is seen in the people and cars that drive through. The car culture of Route 66 is so widespread and does not vary much between different cities along the



highway. Nancy Marmer, in reference to a work of art by Ed Ruscha, says that “with its allusions to both Hollywood and West Coast car culture” the painting, featuring an Amarillo gas station, must be a reference to California pop (Schwartz 33). What Marmer fails to appreciate is that West Coast car culture is almost entirely derived from Route 66 car culture. This means that the supposed “west coast car culture” in Amarillo is actually the culture of Route 66 and should be referred to as such.

While the culture of automobility in Amarillo has always been constant, the infrastructure supporting this automobility has been constantly adapting. Amarillo originated as a city on the railroad and “owed its existence to steel rails” (Ingrassia 65). This origination on railroads laid the groundwork for how the community would function when faced with the expansion of highway systems. When cars first arrived, the automotive industry began to grow exponentially.

Amarillo became fully dependent on automotive transportation almost twenty years before its counterparts, like Los Angeles, on Route 66 (Ingrassia 69). The foundation of railroads made this fast growth possible because the city was able to transition easily from one form of automobility to the next. This same sentiment rings true when Route 66 is developed. Because the dependence on automobiles was widespread the transition from local streets to interstate highways was easy for Amarilloans to adapt to.

The aspect of Amarillo culture that was most heavily influenced by Route 66 was the diversity. Because of the constantly expanding landscape of Amarillo, travel was always happening. The panhandle of Texas is mostly deserted so, there is “no commerce of any significance anywhere but Amarillo” (“Route 66”). This means that almost every traveler passing through will stop in Amarillo to eat, refuel, and rest. This constant rotation of new travelers creates a bustling economy in an otherwise deserted area, as well as diversity of people living and working in Amarillo.

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