

Ace Dowling

Roadside America FYS

Professor Bednar

Route 66: Winding through the Movie, *Cars*

Route 66 is one of the most famous roadways in America. This road has helped define the car culture that helps define America. People in America have had a relationship with cars and have told stories about cars as individuals and as a nation since the early 20th century. Stories, songs, books and movies have been inspired by the nostalgia of Route 66. One of the most famous movies to come out of Pixar was completely inspired by this historic road. The movie *Cars*, directed by John Lasseter and released in 2006, is an animated film for children, but holds appeal for adult audiences as well. The plot centers around an anthropomorphized car that travels across the U.S. There are many places along Route 66 that are referenced in the movie. The most famous highway in America manifests in modern culture, as in the film, *Cars*, and reflects the American car culture, which still thrives today.

US Highway 66, better known as Route 66, was built in 1926, because Car ownership had grown rapidly in the early 20th century; around seventy-eight thousand automobiles were owned in 1905, and by 1920, there were twenty-three million cars on the American roads. Also, the production of the affordable Ford Model T allowed more new drivers to take to the highways. A businessman from Oklahoma named Cyrus Avery, later known as the Father of Route 66, wanted a highway to come to his hometown of Tulsa. Avery founded the US 66 Highway Association which represented five of the eight states it was proposed to go through. Avery envisioned the road passing through small towns that lacked railroads and could connect to larger cities. On April 30, 1926, US Highway 66 was inaugurated as an official road from Chicago to Los Angeles, with many important stops like St. Louis, Amarillo, Oklahoma City,

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and Santa Fe, New Mexico. With the birth of this road, the American car culture was off to a roaring start.

The culture of cars that America loved so dearly produced many stories and films that centered around the automobile. John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, directed by John Ford and released in 1940, was one of the earlier films about a family's journey along Route 66 to escape the Great Depression. Steinbeck highlighted the importance of this highway in giving it one of its biggest epithets "The Mother Road". Many more films followed down the same thematic road of the American road trip, *Gun Crazy* (1950), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *Easy Rider* (1969), *National Lampoon's Vacation* (1983), *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *Cars* (2006). All of these movies were filmed on or influenced by the iconic Route 66. In 1995, the US National Interior and National Park Service published a Special Resources study called *Route 66* in which they considered preservation options for the famous road. In trying to define the significance of Route 66, the study commented on its social importance, "Route 66 imaginatively documented in prose, songs, film, and television has come to represent that essence of the American highway culture" (Dimont, ed., 8). That this road is the subject of so many art forms, is indeed telling.

The entire setting of the film, *Cars* runs along Route 66. When the movie opens, we are introduced to the protagonist, Lightning McQueen. Lightning, and all of the characters in the movie, are anthropomorphized cars. Lightning is an ambitious and self-centered race car who wants to win at all costs. While racing for the Piston Cup, the championship race, Lightning wants to prove that a rookie will be the first to win the Piston Cup. He is so obsessed with winning, that he visits his pit crew only one time to get gas and doesn't even want his tires changed because it will take too long. Then on the last lap, he is ahead but his tires blow out.

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The other race cars are right behind him and he crawls to the checkered flag, but right as he gets to the finish, two other cars get there at the same time, and the race becomes a three way tie. It is determined that the Piston Cup will be decided with a three car race in California. On the way there, a mishap occurs and Lightning finds himself on Route 66. This is when the audience first sees the Route 66 sign as the camera slowly pans up to display the iconic white metal sign with bold black letters and numbers (Lasseter, 2006, 23:51). This sign lets the viewer know that he will now be traveling on this historic stretch of highway as reality merges with fiction.

You can find the Route 66 sign all along this historic road and in many places in the movie. The road begins in Chicago with a sign stating that you are at the start of the highway, and there, you know you will be on a journey through the heart of America. A Chicago motorcycle rental store explains the sign's origin as originally "a simple white-and-black metal sign with the words "Route 66" in large letters. Today, the copper-brown Historic Route – Illinois U.S. 66 sign hangs above the BEGIN sign" (Explorify Motorcycle Rentals). The sign itself is a major tourist attraction. There are signs in all eight states that the road passes through: Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California, where the highway ends in Santa Monica. This sign itself is a symbol of something more than this amazing road. It embodies a time when people could find adventure as they traveled from point A to point B. It wasn't just about reaching a destination, it was about the journey. This idea and Route 66 will always be a part of American car culture. People still buy stickers, shirts, and mugs with the nostalgic phrase-Route 66. Even in the movie, there is a nostalgic montage scene set to the song, *Route 66* by Chuck Berry where Lightning transforms to become more like the older, classic version that fits the Route 66 charm. He visits the gift shop surrounded by Route 66 signs and

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bumper stickers (Lasseter, 2006, 1:22:22- 1:24:30). The movie showcases this continued nostalgia for this stretch of the American highway.

Another iconic setting in the movie is in a town called Radiator Springs, where Lightning learns some important life lessons. The name Radiator Springs likely comes from either Peach Springs, Arizona or Baxter Springs, Kansas, and takes inspiration from some of the towns' layout. It also incorporates features from a few other towns like Seligman, Arizona and Tucumcari, New Mexico. These tiny drive-through towns all have small businesses and hotels along the road and old, flashing neon signs lighting up the night sky (Lasseter, 2006, 1:25:53). In the movie there are many great shots in Radiator Springs which resemble actual places. Lizzie's Curio Shop is modeled after Sandhills Curiosity Shop in Erick, Oklahoma (Lasseter, 2006, 25:15). There are also some scenes that show what the town used to be like in its prime. Lightning's friend, Sally, explains how the town used to be before the interstate highway overtook it. She says, "Drivers didn't drive to make time but to have a good time" (Lasseter, 2006, 1:12:28. 1:14:22). The movie reflects the loss of this special era of travel on the American highway. It is clear that John Lasseter took inspiration from these small towns along Route 66 in creating his Radiator Springs. The movie honors what these real life locations meant to people.

The movie also used direct references to roadside attractions along Route 66. During the 1950's, establishments along Route 66 used whatever means they could to attract more drivers. They advertised natural attractions like the Grand Canyon or Meteor Crater. If they lacked something natural, they created weird statues and art, like a dock made to look like a sperm whale in Catoosa, Oklahoma or a bunch of cadillacs half buried in the ground in Amarillo, Texas. In the movie *Cars*, you can see Cadillac Ranch for most of the film but not as it is in

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reality. Instead, the buried Cadillac's appear in the mountain range behind the town with the Cadillac fins sticking up on the horizon (Lasseter, 2006, 35:27, 1:46:21). Cadillac Ranch was built by a bunch of art-hippies imported from San Francisco in June of 1974. They called themselves the Ant Farm, and they had a silent billionaire partner from Amarillo named Stanley March who wanted a piece of the public art on his property that he hoped would baffle locals. The hippies wanted a tribute to the Cadillac tail fin and they came up with this unique and well-thought out idea. Ten Cadillacs were driven into one of Stanley March's fields on the day of the summer solstice, they were half buried, nose down and at a 60% angle which is the same angle of the sloping sides of the Great Pyramids of Giza. They faced west in a line, going from an older Cadillac model, the Club Sedan from 1949, to the newest model of Cadillac with tail fins, the Sedan de Ville from 1963. To this day Cadillac Ranch is one of the biggest tourist attractions on Route 66; it even has a song named after it by Bruce Springsteen called *Cadillac Ranch*. It's easy to see why Lasseter used this Route 66 classic as a backdrop in his movie.

Another tourist attraction on Route 66 in the movie *Cars* is the "Here it is" sign at the Jack Rabbit trading post in Jack Rabbit, Arizona. In 1949, Jim Taylor, a local entrepreneur bought a building in Arizona on Route 66. Taylor always drove around with a statue of a black rabbit in the back of his convertible. People liked the rabbit and wanted to take pictures of it. He decided to put the rabbit in the ground in front of his building and that is how the Jack Rabbit trading post was made. The rabbit became the model for the famous "Here it is" billboard with a rabbit next to the text and a bunch of little rabbits on the top of the sign looking like they are hopping to the left. In the background of the movie *Cars* you can see this "Here it is" sign in the back of many of the scenes in Radiator Springs, but instead of a rabbit, it is Lizze, an old Model

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T who owns the curiosity shop in town. Just like the "Here it is" sign, there are smaller versions of Lizzie on top of the sign driving to the left (Lasseter,2006, 48:01).

Not only are there visual representations of actual Route 66 places in *Cars*, there are also plot references to the glory days of the road. In the movie, Sally explains to Lightning what Radiator Springs was like before there was an interstate. She explains that before, everyone had to take Route 66, and how Radiator Springs was a popular drive through town. People driving by would stop if they needed gas, a restaurant, a hotel, or to discover fun times on the way to their destination. Lightning then realizes the history of where he is and wishes he could have been there to see it (Lasseter, 2006, 1:12:32). This is a powerful depiction of what happened to Route 66. Despite its popularity, it became old and inefficient. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the president at the time, passed the Federal Highway Act in 1954, which planned for thousands of miles of freeways all across America, which would bypass the older, heavily trafficked and slower roads like Route 66. The Interstate would allow people to drive faster and safer because there would be less need to slow down. Just like Radiator Springs in the movie, which becomes like a ghost town, small communities along Route 66 lost business and money when fewer people would drive through. There was a freeway revolt from these small towns, but the interstate prevailed. Even though there was a faster road taking over Route 66, it was still a popular travel route because of its nostalgic past.

The automobile is deeply symbolic of American identity and the American dream. Cars changed the landscape of the US both literally, through its highways and roads, and figuratively, through its car culture. The most famous highway in America, Route 66, is iconic for American car culture. Music, books and film reflect a devotion to this nostalgic strip of roadway. The film,

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Cars, honors this time period and love of the automobile as it directly references towns, hotels, signs, and roadside attractions along Route 66. This homage highlights the good old days of Route 66 and the American way of life on the road, while sharing a bit of its history through anthropomorphic cars. Even though Route 66 was decommissioned by 1985, and all the official signs were taken down, its charm and nostalgia still thrive in American culture and in movies like *Cars*.

I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.

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