Route 66 will turn 100 years old in November. The 2,400-mile corridor from Chicago to Santa Monica is no longer a primary highway or the recreational journey it once was, but it lives on today in the minds of many as a cultural and historical journey into America's past.

The rise and fall of Route 66 left an imprint on many Americans who drove it, but also the towns it passed through. What it gave to the towns at the start, it often took away in the end, highlighting the fragility of tourism-based economies.

As the route celebrates its centennial this year with myriad events, films and caravans, let's get caught up on how Route 66 came to be, what it left behind and what remains today.

How Route 66 Came To Be

Route 66 was established in 1926 as part of the country's first numbered highway system, linking existing roads into a continuous corridor that started in Chicago and traveled 2,400 miles to Santa Monica, California.

Early marketing of the road promoted Route 66 as the "Main Street of America," touting it as a not only direct but enjoyable way to travel across the country.

Americans obliged. The route became a major corridor for migration, commerce and tourism—it first carried Dust Bowl migrants west in the 1930s, and after World War II, it helped define the American road trip and its automobile culture.

The Cultural Impact Of Route 66—Diners, Neon And Roadside America

Route 66 built a roadside economy centered around automobile travel, including hotels, diners and shops. Each town along the route offered its own personality and quirks, with much less of the corporate ownership we see today in towns and rest stops across America. In other words, back then, there wasn't the same thing in every single town. You didn't see the chain restaurants and hotels on Route 66 like you do today (McDonalds, Burger King, Taco Bell, Subway, Comfort Suites, La Quinta and the like). Each place was different.

Instead of relying on familiarity, like many do on pit stops today, uniqueness was the selling point. Independent diners, general stores and service stations were designed to capture the attention of passing drivers—large neon signs, colorful paint jobs, drive-in diners, hip service stations and funky motel branding were some of the most recognizable visual elements of the route, enticing road trippers to pull over and stay a while.

Route 66 Ghost Towns And The Interstate Effect

The decline of Route 66 began with the expansion of the Interstate Highway System in late 1950s, specifically with the passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. Thereafter, interstate highways like I-40 began to reroute traffic away from the smaller communities along Route 66.

Towns that once depended on steady streams of travelers lost their economic base within a matter of years after being bypassed by the interstate highways. Some became ghost towns while others survived as much smaller communities marked by abandoned motels, gas stations and roadside businesses.

Route 66 was officially decommissioned as a single, continuous federal highway in 1985.