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Review of Route 66: The Highway and Its People

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Route 66: The Highway and Its People. Photographic essay by Quinta Scott. Text by Susan Croce Kelly. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. xiv + 210 pp. \$24.95.

Quinta Scott and Susan Croce Kelly have crafted an affectionate contribution to the mythology of Route 66, the U.S. highway stretching from Chicago to Los Angeles. Kelly's eight chapters provide a detailed, illustrated chronology of the highway, from its "birth" in the 1920s through its decommission in 1985. The narrative cruises from humble beginnings and heroic visions, through hard times, to jubilation and inevitable decline. This saga frames the series of documentary photographs by Scott who features crisp views of roadside relics, cafes, and billboards from the route's golden age, and textured portraits of their aging owners. Both photographs and text name, place, and date the subjects who provide the book's voice. Scott and Kelly invite the reader to assume a nostalgic stance, peering from behind your counter or pump onto Route 66, watching American history go by.

This book can be considered part of the boom in publications that privilege highway commerce in charting U.S. culture of the last sixty years. Like most of the leaders in that boom (e.g., Anderson, Baeder, Izenour, Langdon, Liebs, Margolies, Marling, Scott Brown, Stern,

Venturi, Vieyra), Scott and Kelly were originally drawn to the commercial architecture of Route 66, all those tacky signs and buildings. Fortunately, they did not stop there. Joining a more recent wave of publications (e.g., *Lincoln Highway*, *The Strip*) they deemphasize design manners to focus on the interpretations and point of view that specific inhabitants and users recall.

The main strength of the book is the staggering number of rich recollections it includes. Dozens of diverse people steer us through their memories. They are well ordered to outline how Route 66 was originally conceived, funded, and paved, how it was changed by various traffic flows or competition, how it was repeatedly rerouted, and finally how it was bypassed and memorialized in popular arts. Inevitably these tales turn on moments, landscapes, and events that are unique. But they also ground more familiar textbook abstractions—the decline of the railroad, endurance derbies in the Twenties, the Dust Bowl, Okies and rationing in the Thirties, wartime mobilization, post-war marketing, and highway beautification.

The main weakness of the book is its blunt critical edge. Despite the variety of folk voices, entrepreneurs predominate with predictable results. Route 66 becomes the march of civilization and progress in a barren wilderness. Whether from providing a service or fraud, from outwitting tax-payers, or from dispossessing Native Americans, personal profit is rendered just reward for individual ingenuity. The West was "ours" (i.e., Euro-American and generally male) to be paved. Clearly, such Chamber of Commerce history is likely to offend many, particularly American Indians and Latinos/as. For example, it should be hard for any reader to get past page 34, where an anecdote about Bunion Derby winner Andy Payne—a Cherokee bribed to race the length of the Trail of Tears by Route 66 booster "Cold Cash" Pyle—concludes, "It was fitting that the prize went to a Sooner." ("Sooner" was the name given to whites who grabbed Indian lands even before 22 April 1889, when the U.S. officially broke its promise to

keep them out.) Such hegemonic vision also leaves the entrepreneurs, the authors, and readers ill-equipped to explain why the Interstate Highway System, which killed Route 66, should not also be considered a sign of progress. Scott and Kelly are entitled to celebrate entrepreneurial myths, but they might have helped them better accommodate history.

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