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Videographer K.C. Keefer sorts through Route 66 memorabilia in his south metro office. Keefer has been shooting video of his trips along the historic highway for his *Genuine Route 66 Life: American Stories From the Route* project. *Photo by Peter Jones*

Local filmmaker explores vestiges of classic U.S. highway

By **PETER JONES**

During the 1960s and '70s, the Keefer station wagon would take the kind of family vacations that barely exist anymore. As the Illinois clan of five kids zoomed east on U.S. Route 30 to visit relatives in Pennsylvania and New York, the patriarch, a verbose newspaper sports writer, kept his children entertained.

The only electronic device in the car was a clunky radio that lost stations with the wind. It was an era when a chatty father's only competition for attention would come from a backseat sibling rivalry or a loud game of magnetic travel bingo.

"I remember sitting on the front seat between Mom and Dad, staying awake the entire time, and Dad talking about every little place that we would see," said K.C. Keefer, now 53. "When we would see the swing set in front of the motel, we would go crazy, even though we had two swing sets in the backyard at home."

Along the route, the family would become the willing prey of tourist traps — pulling over for dinosaur attractions, the world's largest ketchup bottle, or perhaps a pecan logroll or portable travel game at Stuckey's.

"I think about kids today with their electronic devices and what they miss," Keefer said. "You can wait and watch a movie when you're idle."

Flash forward four decades: Popular tastes have become "sophisticated." Airline flights are cheaper. High-speed interstates keep ground traffic moving.

But K.C. Keefer is still on the road — these days in

the driver's seat, motoring west in a sort of car-turned-time-machine when he and wife, Nancy Barlow, fill 'er up and make a pilgrimage to a famous highway that technically no longer exists.

Despite being decommissioned in the 1980s, the legendary Route 66, replete with its lines of quirky motels and offbeat roadside attractions, refuses to die, even now, some 60 years after the birth of an interstate freeway system that was designed to overrun its more charismatic predecessors.

"It was a big part of travel historically. Now, everything's fragmented and the interstates dominate," Keefer said. "But when you drive I-40 from Oklahoma City all the way to Barstow, Calif., you're basically traveling the old Route 66. All you have to do is peel off at a given town, and if you're driving Main Street, you're most likely driving Route 66."

The highway has survived, in part, because it was never constructed in the first place, having been commissioned in 1926, strung together from a hodgepodge of existing farm roads,

dirt roads, quasi-highways and Main streets.

"People think Route 66 is gone, but it will never be gone because Main Street America will always be there," Keefer said.

Only 176 miles of the original 2,448-mile route is undrivable today, he said. Historic Route 66 signs still mark much of the roadway.

American stories

When Keefer, a south-metro Denver videographer, heads down 66, he packs his video camera along with his roadmap. For the last three years, he has documented his trips for a project he calls *Genuine Route 66 Life: American Stories From the Route*.

The resulting YouTube channel boasts a range of themed explorations of the highway, as well as interviews with mom-and-pop businesses and travelers who have gotten — as the song goes — their "kicks" on Route 66.

For Keefer, who has made friends with many of his fellow routers, the experience has been a highway vacation down memory lane and a reminder that the cultural grass for tourists is often greener on the other side of the world.

"When you stay on Route 66, you wave, you make eye contact, you exchange greetings," Keefer said. "This is like going back. It's a time capsule. We'll stay in a mom-and-pop with 10 other guests and eight of them will be European. They're covered in red, white and blue and are just over-the-top in love with the culture."

The Will Rogers Highway or Main Street of America was an exemplar of the U.S. highway system, and an American original in more ways than one. Winding from Chicago to Los Angeles, the road served as the 20th century's gateway to the West,

most famously for Okies fleeing the 1930s Dust Bowl.

"Highway 66 is the main migrant road," John Steinbeck wrote in *The Grapes of Wrath*. "66 — the long concrete path across the country, waving gently up and down on the map, from the Mississippi to Bakersfield — over the red lands and the gray lands, twisting up into the mountains, crossing the Divide and down into the bright and terrible desert, and across the desert to the mountains again, and into the rich California valleys."

By the 1950s, Route 66 had further taken on a life of its own, inspiring a widely popular song, covered by artists ranging from Nat King Cole to the Rolling Stones, and a television series of the same name, and lending its catchy number to the Phillips 66 gas company. Beat writer Jack Kerouac further mythologized the free-spirited highway in his classic cross-country novel *On the Road*.

The definitive motorway through Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma, Kansas, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona passed countless touchstones of Americana and kitsch before its culmination as Hollywood's classic Sunset Boulevard.

"It was originally just a road, a way to get from A to B. Now, the destination is the road," Keefer said. "Traveling west, everything opens up. You can see farther. You can feel it more. The overall consensus is the West is the best."

A stop in Tucumcari

Much of the appeal of Route 66 stems from the highway's quirky resting places, including the Wigwam Motel in San Bernardino, Calif., ["the best night of sleep you'll ever have," says Keefer], and vintage motor courts, intact with their original single-car garages. Keefer has produced 11 short films just on the 66-year-old Blue Swallow motor court in Tucumcari, N.M.

"In the old spaghetti Western [*For*

a Few Dollars More], Lee Van Cleef says, 'Does this train stop in Tucumcari?' It's the opening line. That's the only thing people know about Tucumcari," Keefer said with a laugh.

Although Western-themed roadside attractions have died a slow death across much of the country, Route 66 still claims the likes of Jesse James's alleged hideout, Indian marketplaces and an inexplicable opportunity to "cattle punch on a jackrabbit."

Among Keefer's favorites is Henry's Rabbit Ranch in Staunton, Ill., a bunny rescue farm with an eye-catching line of Volkswagen Rabbits lodged in the ground.

"He doesn't make any money. He doesn't sell many T-shirts. It's as kooky as it gets, I guess," the filmmaker said.

Runners-up might include Gary's Gay Parita, a nonoperational old-fashioned filling station near Halltown, Mo., and a replica Packard dealership in Afton, Okla., that offers free toilet paper and the "cleanest restrooms on Route 66."

Don't ask the filmmaker about his long-term plans for his hours of footage. You might get an answer as unpredictable as a stop-and-go road trip to California.

"I'm a creative. We don't always think that far down the road," he said, in unintentional pun. "I don't know if I could ever compile them [into a full-length film], but it's something I would consider."

So far, Keefer has only committed to a short documentary about the abandoned Painted Desert Trading Post in rural northeast Arizona. The mysterious and near-forgotten road stop is literally miles from nowhere — but boy, if those dilapidated walls could talk.

In the meantime, Keefer and Barlow will continue their treks down 66, a video camera in tow, never really knowing what they will be documenting next.

"We've done this for a long time and we still have a lot to see," he said.



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