INTRODUCTION

My father was born in Joliet, and my mother was from Chicago. They married in 1948 and moved to Hammond, Indiana. A triangle of highways connected my childhood home and those of my parents; a trip to my maternal grandmother's home in Chicago required a drive north along U.S. Route 41, and the Clark family farm near Joliet was due west on U.S. Route 6. The hypotenuse of that triangle, connecting Joliet with Chicago, was Route 66.

Starting in the early 1960s, my family explored America by car each summer with month-long vacations. One year, we planned a tour of the state parks of Illinois. After visiting a historic site north of Springfield, we realized we had time to venture further from home than originally anticipated. We noted that St. Louis was only 100 miles away, so we decided to visit the Gateway Arch. Our Illinois trip suddenly included a drive further southwest along Route 66.

Although Route 66 traversed eight states, its usefulness for our family was for travel of a much more local variety. The highway's nickname as the "Main Street of America" was apropos, since it served travelers whose destinations were across town as well as across the continent.

In 1933–1934, Chicago hosted the *Century of Progress*, a world's fair highlighting 100 years of scientific progress. Special route markers guided visitors to the fair along the main thoroughfares leading to Chicago. Among the 14 marked routes were U.S. Route 12, the marine route; U.S. Route 20, the automotive route; and Route 66, the agricultural route. Visitors driving from downstate Illinois and the southwest would likely follow Route 66 and the agricultural route markers, featuring a farmer and plow, northeast through the Corn Belt.

Those with a knowledge of history might have understood that as they traveled the agricultural route, they were following the trail blazed by pioneering farmers nearly a century before. In New York, the 1825 opening of the Erie Canal created a navigable waterway between New York City and Lake Michigan. Thus from its incorporation as a town in 1833, Chicago was an emerging marketplace, poised to become a rival to St. Louis as the western gateway. According to Milo M. Quaife's book *Chicago's Highways Old and New*, along the corridor that would become Route 66, in seasons when the primitive path was passable, "a steady stream of wagons laden with the produce of the countryside" poured northeastward into Chicago. Wheat, corn, oats, and barley made their way to the docks along the Chicago River.

> In addition droves of cattle and hogs . . . wended their way by converging routes to their common doom in the slaughter yards of the incipient metropolis. . . . Returning, the wagons conveyed such supplies of coffee, salt, and groceries, stoves, crockery, or other merchandise as might be needed to supply the farmer's household, or perchance to replenish the retail stock of the storekeeper of his home community.

When the Illinois state legislature created Cook County in 1831, its land mass included most of the current six-county Chicago metropolitan area. The county population was 1,310, not including Native Americans. Quaife's book states that, to allow free passage of citizens to the county seat in unincorporated Chicago from the communities of Walker's Grove, just south of modern Plainfield, and Hickory Creek, near present-day Joliet, the county board "made provision for marking out the first two county highways of Cook County. . . . One of these roads ran on the line of . . . Ogden Avenue to the house of Barney Lawton at Riverside, and from thence to the house of James Walker, on the DuPage River, and so on to the west line of the County." Thus the corridor that would become Route 66 was an official county highway 95 years before the U.S. Highway system's creation. "Over this route, on January 1, 1834, was dispatched the first stagecoach which ever ran west out of Chicago. Its proprietor, Dr. John L. Temple, had secured the government contract for carrying the mail between Chicago and St. Louis."

Native Americans originally used this corridor because it was the shortest overland route between the navigable portions of the Chicago and Illinois Rivers. As early as 1673, French Canadian explorers Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet had traveled by canoe up the local waterways to Lake Michigan. The difficulties of the journey through a slough known as Mud Lake led Joliet to write in his journal that the digging of a canal would create an unbroken waterway between the Illinois River and Lake Michigan. Wars, territorial disputes, and a lack of economic impetus kept the canal plans on the back burner until the completion of New York's Erie Canal changed the commercial landscape.

In 1848, the Illinois and Michigan Canal opened, giving Chicago a water route of commerce and transportation from Lake Michigan to the Illinois River at Ottawa. Especially in the winter months, when the canal closed to navigation, the Chicago-to-Walker's Grove county highway remained important for local transit, stagecoaches, and mail transportation. However, the *Chicago Tribune* stated that, "the road was regarded as having a grudge against every living thing—horse, ox, or man. Attempts to improve it by settling huge rocks for a foundation only served to draw new curses both on the road and on the citizens who tried to reform it." On the section from Ogden and Madison Streets in Chicago to Riverside, the Southwestern Plank Road Company received the franchise to build a single-track wooden roadbed. According to Quaife, "A four-horse vehicle paid 37½ cents toll for the privilege of traversing the ten mile highway; a single team paid 25 cents and a horse and rider half as much."

Chicago's first railroad—the Chicago and Galena Union—opened in 1848. The Chicago and Rock Island Railroad ran its first train from Chicago to Joliet in 1852, and by 1856, the Rock Island became the first railroad to bridge the Mississippi River. As the railway grew, it added the later Route 66 towns of Oklahoma City; Amarillo, Texas; and Tucumcari, New Mexico, to its litany of depots. In the years after the Civil War through the beginning of the 20th century, Chicago became the railroad capital of North America, and several other railways blazed an iron road through the Route 66 corridor. The Chicago and Alton Railroad connected through Joliet, Dwight, Bloomington, and Springfield to St. Louis. The Acheson, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad stretched west from Chicago's Dearborn Station through Missouri, Kansas, and Colorado, then veered southward to connect Albuquerque with Flagstaff and Kingman, Arizona, and Needles, Barstow, San Bernardino, and Los Angeles, California.

The era of canals and rails saw the marginalization of road building. Farm-to-market roads in rural areas received cursory maintenance, enough to allow wagons to carry goods to the nearest canal port or rail depot. Urban thoroughfares ran the gamut from graded dirt, pine block, stone, or paving brick, depending upon the funds available to the community. Rail quickly became the preferred transportation mode for both local and long distance travel. The Chicago and Alton Railroad and Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad provided commuter and interurban service along the Route 66 corridor in Illinois. In 1903, the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific collaborated with the Southern Pacific on the *Golden State Limited* passenger service, which whisked travelers from Chicago to Los Angeles in 66 hours. Santa Fe's *Super Chief* and the *City of Los Angeles* trains operated by the Chicago and North Western and the Union Pacific

Railroads, also offered limited-stop service between the cities that would later be the terminal points of Route 66.

In addition to the passenger service offered by the long haul carriers, local street rail transit began in the Chicago area in 1859. Just after the 1871 Chicago fire, residents dislocated from the burned district flooded into the Route 66 corridor through the city's North Lawndale community and the near southwest suburbs of Cicero, Berwyn, Riverside, and Lyons. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, a horse-drawn streetcar line along Ogden Avenue started serving the new subdivisions prior to 1879; transit time from downtown to the west side was 41 minutes by one-horse power. Adams Street, which would become westbound Route 66 in 1953, was home to horsecars in 1885 and cable cars in 1893. The Adams Street and Ogden Avenue lines converted to electric trolley by 1906.

Street rail provided a convenient service at a nickel per trip for the working class; the merchant and upper class could afford to own a horse and carriage or to hire livery service as needed. Endeavors undertaken to reserve one urban thoroughfare for the exclusive use of light carriages bore fruit when Jackson Street was designated a Park Boulevard creating a grand carriageway between the lakefront Lake Park (later Grant Park) and the west side Garfield Park. Boulevards were off-limits to commercial traffic, which meant no "teaming" of heavy cartage wagons and no franchises for street rail. Boulevards were often much wider than other city streets and were among the first thoroughfares to be paved with asphalt. Due to their smooth riding surfaces, the boulevards became the favored routes for the "wheelmen"—the bicycling enthusiasts of the late 1800s.

The paving project on Jackson Boulevard began in 1892 west of the Chicago River in the jurisdiction of the West Park Commission. The *Chicago Tribune* stated that, "the roadway, forty-four feet wide, smooth as a marble mantel in a parlor, is one of the best bits of asphaltum work in the world." In August 1897, the South Park Commission completed their section, east of the river to Michigan Boulevard. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, "hundreds of bicyclists and scores of carriages and mail wagons tried the new asphalt and found it was good. . . . [Those] who used the boulevard last night called down blessings on the heads of the . . . Park Commissioners for the easy road to the West Side."

At the beginning of the 20th century, as those affluent enough to own their own horse and carriage traded them in for early horseless carriages, boulevards, including Jackson, remained the preferred thoroughfares for the Sunday drive. In 1900, there were 600 registered automobiles in the entire state of Illinois. That number grew to over 6,000 by 1905 and to over 15,000 in 1908. That year, the assembly-line production of the Ford Model T made motor touring affordable to the working class. The motoring enthusiast venturing beyond the boulevards into the rural hinterland surrounding Chicago encountered roads neglected for over half a century.

Historically road and bridge construction in Illinois was the responsibility of local government entities: municipalities, townships, and counties. In 1917, S. E. Brady, the state's superintendent of highways, wrote,

> It was not until about 1911 that the people of the State of Illinois began to realize the condition of our highways as compared to other states and the handicap under which we were working. . . . Illinois, standing first in agriculture, second in wealth and third in population, occupied twenty-third place among the states of the union in the matter of highways which were improved.

To pull Illinois out of the mud, the state government went into the road-building business.

In 1916, the Illinois General Assembly passed "An Act to Construct Hard-Surfaced Roads upon the Public Highways." The act called for $60 million in bonds for the construction of the pavements with automobile registration fees earmarked to repay the debt. The Illinois Division of Highways issued 46 separate bond issues, with each paying for construction on a specified route. State Bond Issue (SBI) Route 4 provided funds for paving the route from Chicago to East

St. Louis, via Berwyn, Riverside, Lyons, Joliet, Dwight, Pontiac, Bloomington, Lincoln, Elkhart, Williamsville, Springfield, Carlinville, Edwardsville, and Granite City. By December 1926, motorists traveling from Chicago to St. Louis could follow markers for SBI Route 4 all the way through Illinois. They would find hard-surfaced roads from Jackson and Michigan Boulevards in Chicago to the Mississippi River crossing on the McKinley bridge at Venice.

On January 15, 1927, the United States Bureau of Public Roads officially announced a uniform numbering system for federal interstate highways. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, the 80,000-mile system's objective was to reach all parts of the country with roads "upon which motorists may start with complete confidence of smooth travel," and "to eliminate existing confusion as to route designations, markings, and safety signs." U.S. highway shields marked state roads expected to carry the major part of interstate traffic. Route 66 had a total mileage of 2,448, running from Chicago via Joliet, passing through St. Louis, and ending in Los Angeles. By the summer of 1928, Route 66 signs were in place along Illinois SBI Route 4.

According to Bobby Troup's classic song, "(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66," which was recorded by Nat King Cole, the highway was "the best" when taking a "California trip." However my family's commutes between paternal and maternal homesteads and our summer vacations took us no further west on the mother road than that visit to the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. One could start driving anywhere upon its length and travel in either direction from any point. Access was not limited, nor was there any limitation to the depth of a Route 66 experience.

Route 66 could be a corridor of travel to a destination, or it could function as the destination itself. Those with the latter point of view understand that history is not contained within museums, books, or memorial plaques. Our common history is everywhere, and clues to its meaning exist in every object in our built and natural environments. *Route 66 in Chicago* will take a closer look at the built environment along the highway's corridor in the metropolitan area. It will show how the structures along the road help symbolize and interpret the shared history of the city and the highway. The Route 66 journey begins in Chicago for reasons historic and contemporary, and commercial and utilitarian. It is time to get our kicks on Chicago's Route 66.