



## Time Travel Turnpike

*This billboard graces the entrance to Memory Lane in Lexington, Illinois.*

BY JOHN L. GANN, JR.

America's celebrated Mother Road, Route 66, called the most famous road in the world, was born in Illinois.

It ran from Chicago to St. Louis and then crossed seven other states. The Illinois Official Highway Map shows "Historic Route 66" just east of Interstate 55.

History often spells tourist appeal in the Land of Lincoln. So places like Pontiac, Springfield and Litchfield use their Mother Road locations to draw tourists and boost their local economies.

But what was the history on this historic highway really like? Three of the smaller municipalities on the state's Mother Road have given us an answer.

### TIME TRAVEL ON THE GO

A one-half mile segment of the original Route 66 as it must have been in its glory days was given new life by the City of Lexington. A few miles east and north of the Town of Normal, Lexington's population is 2,049.

You can hike, bike or drive this time travel turnpike. While you do you will see reproductions of the roadside signs and billboards of yesteryear, including the famous sequential Burma Shave signs. It's time travel on the go. Lexington calls it Memory Lane.

The father and son team of Charles and Chuck Wright recognized the value of a stretch of Route 66 that was abandoned after the advent of I-55 and convinced the state to give it to the city. They cleaned it up and lined it with paper poster billboards. After the paper posters deteriorated, they



were replaced by replicas, including the Burma Shave signs, made by students and volunteers.

“The reproduction of outdoor advertising signs,” says Outdoor Advertising Association of Illinois Director Rose Trader, “acknowledges that these displays were part of the adventure of travel on Route 66. They entertained, provided travel information, and drove the local economy just as outdoor advertising does today.”

Mayor Spencer Johansen says Memory Lane has cost the city only around \$3,000 to date. Previously a walking trail, it was opened up to motor traffic to better showcase it to all visitors.

A traveler from Delaware posted this impression of Memory Lane on the web:

“Driving on this old road, with some replicas of old signs, took us back in time — we could imagine what it was like to drive Route 66 100 years ago. That’s exactly what we most wanted to experience on our Route 66 road trip — get a feel for what it was like to travel it decades ago. So this was one of our most memorable experiences on our trip.”

## VISITORS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

The much smaller Village of Towanda (population 431) hosts a three and one half mile time travel turnpike comparable to Memory Lane on its part of old Route 66.

Mayor Thomas Wagner points to Fred Walk as the initiator of the Towanda Route 66 Parkway. Begun in 1999 by Walk, then a local high school social studies teacher, who now teaches at Illinois State University, the Parkway also features revived Burma

Shave signs plus eight educational murals, one for each state through which 66 passes.

Towanda’s Parkway has drawn more than 2,000 visitors each year from around the world, including England, Spain, Italy, France, Australia, Japan and Brazil. Faculty and students from the high school provide brochures in several languages.

How do people learn about a restored highway found in such a tiny village? Walk points to publications of the Route 66 Association of Illinois ([il66assoc.org](http://il66assoc.org)) and the Illinois Office of Tourism ([enjoyillinois.com/route66](http://enjoyillinois.com/route66)). Visitors from Europe have seen reruns of the old Route 66 television series. Others visit Towanda’s website, [route66towanda.org](http://route66towanda.org). Towanda’s brochures are found at area restaurants and at the Route 66 Museum in Pontiac.

## ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

Towanda has put a lot of investment into its Parkway, with landscaping, parking, benches, reproductions of historic signs and the eight state murals.

The village contributes mowing services, and Walk has secured grants from State Farm and the National Geographic Society. A donation allows the bereaved to plant a tree along the Parkway in memory of lost loved ones, and others donate as well.



*Towanda has added amenities along its Route 66 restoration that have been enjoyed by visitors from around the world. Photo courtesy Fred Walk.*

Walk attributes most of the success to Towanda’s volunteers. High school and Illinois State University students and local fraternal organizations have put in thousands of hours of work. The success of the Parkway, says Walk, “shows what community is all about.”

## MORE TIME TRAVEL

Not far away, the City of Chenoa (population 1,877) has preserved another mile of old 66. The city boasts three other attractions from yesteryear.



*Murals like this make a trip along Route 66 in Towanda more interesting. Photo courtesy Fred Walk.*

A restored wall sign still advertises Selz Royal Blue Shoes; a store from 1889, Chenoa Pharmacy, is still open; and the home of Matthew T. Scott honors the city's founder.

Off Route 66 but nearby, El Paso (population 2,854) offers time travel for the soul: the birthplace of Fulton Sheen.

Sheen, a Catholic archbishop known to many non-Catholics for his television broadcasts in the 1950s, had even more viewers than TV pioneer Milton Berle. The office of Mayor J.W. Price notes that El Paso's 2.8-mile walking trail comes within a half-block of the archbishop's birthplace.

## A TIME TRAVEL TRAIL

Interest in yesterday's highways may be just the flip side of the nostalgic fascination so many have with yesterday's cars. Illinois municipalities seeking tourists commonly highlight their classic car shows in their ads and brochures.

Larger cities in the area offer 20th century time travel as well. The Town of Normal has a historic movie theatre and an historic Cities Service gas station. The City of Pontiac offers museums celebrating the car of the same name, painted wall signs, and Route 66 itself.

Multi-community trails have become a popular tourist marketing device, most often associated with things to eat or drink. A central Illinois Time Travel Trail could be the first of its kind in the country.

## TIME TRAVEL THERAPY

Five years ago, the *Review* presented results of Harvard University research on the bodily benefits of going back in our imagination to an earlier part of our lives.\*

In 1981, septuagenarian and older men spent five days isolated in an artificial retro environment that replicated 1959. Surprising the researchers, the men afterwards scientifically tested younger in bodily capabilities and mental performance and were judged to look younger as well.

Some of the men were asked to imagine themselves just as they were back in 1959 — to once again be their younger selves. They were to think and talk about nothing that happened since, treating 1959 as if it were the present. Others — the control group — were instructed to reminisce about their past experiences but treat 1959 as part of the past.

Even the control group tested younger after the experience, though not as much as the group that tried for total immersion.

That suggests that partial exposure to the past had some beneficial effect. That in turn may imply that even very partial exposures — such as a trip along a reconstructed historic highway — may have some beneficial effects on the body and mind.

But there is one indisputable benefit in putting together a Route 66 restoration. "It's been a bonding experience for the community," says Fred Walk. There's something special

about taking on an improbable task like bringing back part of the past and succeeding.

Road trips and roadside environments are certainly among the most frequent and best-remembered of our past experiences and those of our parents and grandparents. Lexington, Towanda and Chenoa acted upon that idea when they gave us carefully restored pieces of Route 66.

Or as the Burma Shave sign makers might have put it:

*If You Want to Travel*

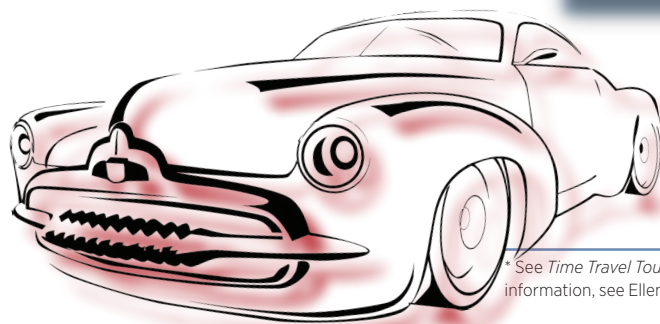
*Into Yesterday*

*You Need a Road*

*That Goes*

*That Way*

**ROUTE 66**



\* See *Time Travel Tourism*, November, 2017. For more information, see Ellen J. Langer, *Counterclockwise*.

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