

## **HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND INTERPRETATION IN THE SHADOW OF TWO UNITED STATES ICONS: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND ROUTE 66**

CAROL J. DYSON, AIA  
*Illinois Historic Preservation Agency*  
*1 Old State Capitol Plaza*  
*Springfield, Illinois, 62701, USA*  
[carol.dyson@illinois.gov](mailto:carol.dyson@illinois.gov)

**Abstract:** Springfield, Illinois, in the U.S.A claims two internationally visited historic spirits of place: Historic Route 66 Highway and Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War president. Both Lincoln and Route 66 are associated with significant historic places and new museums here. Each year an International Route 66 festival is held, a new Lincoln museum is visited by half-a-million visitors a year, and 2009 will see a major bicentennial celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birth.

Yet what are the relationships between spirit of space, commemoration, and tangible authenticity? While tourism grows on the historic highway, the small motels of Route 66 are being demolished and were named an "11 Most Endangered Historic Site" by the National Trust in 2007. Meanwhile, with oncoming bicentennial celebrations, Lincoln-oriented historic sites and places are undergoing major changes. Contrasts and similarities with how two historic spirits of place are being commemorated, interpreted, reinterpreted, appropriated, and recontextualized is the subject of this paper.

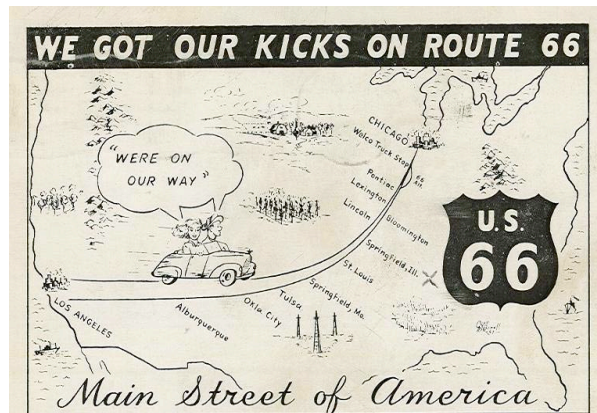
The original premise of this paper was that the heritage interpretations of two different United States icons, Route 66 and Abraham Lincoln, have created important yet dissimilar "spirits of place" in Springfield, Illinois. Lincoln sites are fixed in time and space while Route 66 is a linear highway with dynamic use and is movement oriented. Route 66 interpretation is celebratory in nature while Lincoln's spirit of place is one of commemoration and memorialization. Lincoln sites strive for historical accuracy while Route 66 site priorities are sometimes outside of normative restoration traditions. However, as the author looked at contrasts of commemoration and recontextualization of these spirits of place, equally profound and sometimes surprising similarities became apparent.

**“Abraham Lincoln walks at Midnight (In Springfield, Illinois)”  
(Lindsay 1919)**

Illinois is the proclaimed “Land of Lincoln.” Springfield, Illinois, is the city where Abraham Lincoln lived for 24 years before leaving in 1861 to become the 16<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. Lincoln was the president who drafted the Emancipation Proclamation freeing America’s slaves and led the nation through a long and bloody Civil War. Then, within days of the end of that war, he was assassinated. From that time, Abraham Lincoln’s worthy yet troubled legacy was sanctified by “martyrdom.” From the date of his death the Lincoln legacy has fascinated scholars and the public alike. It is reputed that more books have been written about Abraham Lincoln than any other person except Jesus Christ (Andreasen 2008)

Springfield is home to the tomb where Lincoln is buried, the only house he ever owned, the law office where he worked and the Old State Capitol where he served in the legislature.

**“Get your kicks from Route 66” (Troup 1946)**



*Figure 1.* A postcard map, mailed in 1952, shows two convertible drivers on their way home from California after “getting their kicks.” Although not to scale, Springfield, Illinois is shown near the “x”. Author’s collection.

Route 66 was one of the first improved national highways in the United States and eventually became the most celebrated in popular song, film, television and the public’s imagination. Designated in 1926, the highway provided an all-weather route from Chicago to Los Angeles traveling across eight states and over 2450 miles. However,

by the time the highway was decommissioned in 1985, its pathway had been replaced by an interstate highway system that bypassed cities and towns and was only accessible at periodic on/off ramps (Dept. of Interior 1995).

A popular road during the 1920s, Route 66 was well-promoted by private entrepreneurs and the U.S. Highway Route 66 Association. In 1939 John Steinbeck's novel the Grapes of Wrath provided the route another nickname, "The Mother Road." The book and a related movie showed the tribulations of displaced Oklahomans, traveling on Route 66 to California to flee the drought-induced "dustbowl" during the Great Depression. During World War II Route 66 was heavily utilized for military transport for both troops and supplies. After the war, Route 66 continued as a trucking road and as a popular pathway for middle-class family vacations, leading to the construction of additional gas stations, motels, and restaurants.

Starting in the 1950s four-lane ramp-access interstate highways began to replace Route 66. The last stretch was decommissioned in 1985. In many areas, particularly in Illinois, the new interstates paralleled the Route, and 66 became a frontage road for the faster-moving interstate (Dept. of Interior 1995).

Since the "end" of Route 66 in 1985, it has paradoxically enjoyed a slowly growing revival in popular culture. In each state, non-profit associations work to keep the memory of Route 66 alive. Many towns along the Route (such as Springfield) have recognized its potential as a tourist draw with Route 66 celebrations and events. Tourists and enthusiasts travel the Route, either in short segments or to cross the entire country. Historic car enthusiasts stage rallies along the Route, and towns sponsor 1950s-style festivals. International tour companies, in particular those from Germany, Britain, Japan and Belgium bring groups who bus, drive, or ride motorcycles the entire 2000+ miles (Ambrose 2008).

### **Similarities and Differences**

The historic resources associated with Route 66 and Abraham Lincoln and those who seek them out, are clearly quite different, and yet there are also surprising parallels.

#### TEMPORAL

Abraham Lincoln lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Route 66 is a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon. Lincoln sites have, some for over a century,

been valued and interpreted as significant for their association with one of the country's greatest leaders.

The Route 66 sites, have had an uphill battle to gain recognition as "historic." The motels, restaurants, gas stations, and bridges have been handicapped by their "newer" age in a country where designation usually starts after age 50, and by their vernacular or idiosyncratic roadside designs. Often these roadside resources were not recognized as historic or significant until the late 1980s or 1990s, when many of them were abandoned, endangered, or demolished.

Yet similarly, not all Lincoln sites were immediately acknowledged as "shrines" and deserving of preservation. The state capitol of Lincoln's day, for example, was replaced by a new capitol building in the latter nineteenth century. The Lincoln-associated capitol was used for many years as the county courthouse, heavily modified, and even lifted to have an additional floor added. The structure was repurchased by the state and completely rebuilt in the 1960s to become a historic site and the home of the Illinois State Historical Library. The Lincoln-Herndon Law Offices building housed a shoe store and other businesses before local private citizens funded its restoration as an historic site, also in the 1960s.

#### GEOGRAPHIC

At first glance the various Lincoln sites throughout the Midwest and even in Springfield appear to be scattered, disconnected shrines compared to the linear Route 66. In fact, however, Lincoln has long been the inspiration for numerous passages and pilgrimages, starting with Lincoln's funeral train, which was viewed by tens of thousands of mourning Americans as it slowly traveled from Washington back to Springfield (Schwartz 2008).

In the latter nineteenth century people came to Springfield and the Lincoln Tomb to pay their respects. In the early twentieth century, Lincoln scholars and enthusiasts began to visit the "Lincoln Shrines" and called their trips "Lincoln Pilgrimages." The act of traveling the route and seeking out the lesser-known sites became a rite of passage probably not unlike today's Route 66 travelers, seeking out "lost" alignments or obscure sites. Both were enacting pilgrimages to "stations of the cross," in search of elusive spirits of place (Schwartz 2008).

In the 1960s a new Lincoln Heritage Trail stretching from Washington to Springfield was marked and marketed. Today a heritage marketing campaign, entitled, "Looking for Lincoln," has tied

together numerous Illinois communities and lesser-known Lincoln sites into a more cohesive marketing effort. Today the planning of the 2009 bicentennial of Lincoln's birth is encouraging states to once again cooperatively market Lincoln across state lines.

Just as the Lincoln sites are more "linked" than one might expect, Route 66 is less smoothly linear than it appears. In Springfield it is composed of multiple alignments from different time periods, including a segment that today dead-ends into a lake.

#### THEME

Route 66 has had many specific themes: the national roads movement, the westward migrations of the depression and dust-bowl, the family vacations, the mom-and-pop businesses and the Corvette-riding, free-spirited "Route 66" television show travelers. Today's users of Route 66 appear to be primarily drawn by two themes. First, there is nostalgia for what is perceived to be a simpler time of big cars, small towns, and long summer vacations with two-parent families. Second, there is lure of freedom on the open road, vistas of vast open scenery and the movement towards new adventures, lands unknown, and people unmet (Caton and Santos 2007). This theme may be what particularly resonates with international travelers.

Although the Lincoln sites are in part based on patriotic and commemorative themes, there are commonalities with Route 66. Both Route 66 and Lincoln speak to an "American frontier" mythos. Lincoln embodied the "Log Cabin President," a theme first established during William Henry Harrison's presidential election in 1840 (Pesson 1984). Americans believed that the brave and noble frontiersman of the west could prove himself more worthy than members of the eastern urban elite.

Similarly, Route 66 has always carried this manifest-destiny American mythos along its path. Although traffic, both local and long-distance, has obviously traveled the road in both directions, much of the publicity about the road, both historically and especially today, has focused on a westward trip (Sculle 1996). As the road leading through America's last western frontiers, Route 66 relates to a similarly romantic view of the American past, one of forever moving westward, traveling through the wilderness to create a new destiny. Many of the refugees from the dustbowls of the 1930s did travel Route 66 westward looking for opportunities. Similarly the vacationing baby boomers of the post-war period traveled the Route to see a "wilder"

west, stopping at “Indian Trading Posts” and staying the night in teepee shaped motels (Sculle 1991).

### PRESERVATION ISSUES

Few of the historic resources of Route 66 are completely secure physically and financially as evidenced by their inclusion in The World Monuments Fund 2008 listing of the 100 most endangered sites. It is the motels, however, which are perhaps the single resource type most in jeopardy. The “Route 66 Motels” were named one of the Eleven Most Endangered Sites of 2007 by the U.S. National Trust for Historic Preservation. The motels along Route 66 in Springfield and elsewhere have not, on the whole, enjoyed a revival akin to other Route 66 sites. People will eat at unconventional diners or stop to have their picture taken in front of restored gas stations, but the



individually run motels that were so common on Route 66 often do not have the resources to compete with the national chains of larger modern motels. In Springfield alone, two Route 66 era motels were demolished in the last year.

The National Park Service’s Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program is promoting, with workshops and other initiatives, the restoration of these motels as “boutique” inns for Route 66 travelers. The Motel Safari in Tucumcari, New Mexico has just been renovated as a prototype by independent developers. The Motel Safari’s website advertises that beyond the authentic Route 66

*Figure 2.* The A. Lincoln Motel along Route 66 in Springfield was demolished in 1991.

connection, it offers the high-tech and luxury conveniences of an upscale hotel. The president of the development firm Richard Talley stated that business is steadily growing, but that the “hardest part of our venture has been getting the word out, since no one’s ever really done this before, and we can’t yet compete with the big chain hotels marketing” (2008).

### **Implications**

Both Route 66 and Lincoln sites reflect a continual interaction between interpreters and participants. This is more clearly discernable for Route 66. As people drive the road, patronize businesses, and observe the scenery, they interact with strangers in short vignettes strung like pearls along the highway. Meeting other travelers and the owners of businesses appears to be a major draw of the Route 66 experience. As buildings and landscapes are demolished, the scenery evolves. As new businesses open they, too, become part of the Route. For long-distance travelers the effort involved becomes a personal rite of passage (Caton and Santos 2007).

But Route 66 is not alone in experiential tourism. Ethnographer Edward M. Bruner has discussed (2004) how at the reconstructed log village of Lincoln’s New Salem the audience becomes more than passive viewers and actively participates with the interpreters of the site. Furthermore, he points out how an historic site is continually interpreted and reinterpreted and not static.

One example of Bruner’s theory can be seen at Lincoln’s Tomb, where re-enactors of the 114<sup>th</sup> Calvary perform a military flag-lowering ceremony in summers. As part of their event, they invite a visitor from the crowd to don a cap and march along with the wool-clad “Civil War soldiers.” This is effective participatory commemoration.

And the physical sites themselves evolve; they are continually being restored and renovated. The Lincoln Tomb is currently and discretely installing geo-thermal heating, while at the Lincoln Law Office a second restoration is proposed, to reflect new research.

Springfield’s new \$115 million Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM) excites the emotions more immediately and viscerally. The museum is as much entertainment as static display, with vignettes of life-size and life-like simulacrum of Lincoln with others at various stages of his life. Theatrical shows use holographic Lincolns and seats that shake when cannons roar. Crowds

line up be photographed next to the life-like Lincoln family in front of a replica of the presidential White House.

Loved by the public, the ALPLM delights some scholars yet puzzles others with its “edutainment” approach. Yet through new technology the museum is effectively communicating to millions of visitors two compelling and important themes of interpretation related to Lincoln. First, it tells the story of the self-made man, the “Great American Story” of boundless opportunity (even the presidency) is achievable through hard work. The second theme is the horrors of and the dramatic end to slavery in the United States (Andreasen 2008). Thus, the ALPLM is telling the Lincoln Legacy in a twenty-first century manner; a broad and more inclusive look at history told with seductive high-tech efficiency.

There are those who travel commemoratively to be part of a Lincoln “pilgrimage” just as previous generations did. Children reach up to rub the nose of the giant Gutzon Borglum-sculpted Lincoln bust in front of the Lincoln Tomb for good luck. The shiny, hand-rubbed nose was worn away over the years, and today the bronze is visibly patched. Efforts to discourage this tradition have long been abandoned. This superstitious connection between the visitor and Lincoln has become so accepted that the city’s official Christmas ornament for 1996 was entitled “The Legend of Rubbing Lincoln’s Nose” and depicts a young boy reaching high to rub the statue’s nose. Popular heritage interaction has become iconographic.

## **Conclusion**

Tourists and locals alike visit both Springfield icons for different reasons. Some Route 66 travelers appear to seek individual trial and growth, to experience the natural and changing beauty of the United States, visit the small “forgotten” towns of America, or attend antique car rallies. Nearly all seem to enjoy the social aspects of the travel. With Lincoln, the touristic motives reflect patriotic education and/or curiosity regarding the new ALPLM’s virtuoso story-telling. Still others will arrive with new perspectives as the 2009 Bicentennial unfolds.

Both Route 66 and Lincoln sites have struggled with questions regarding preservation, ownership, authenticity, interpretation and marketing. But if, on the surface, today’s Lincoln sites appear more sophisticated in their interpretative interfaces and conservation, the author would suggest that the differences are not due to their dissimilar subjects. Although during their long history some Lincoln



sites were heavily reconstructed, all new efforts are based on current paradigms of authenticity. With Route 66, the stories, the businesses, the people, the driving, and the landscapes appear as important to many visitors as the buildings themselves. The Cozy Dog Diner was reconstructed in 1991 (on the site of the demolished A. Lincoln Motel, figure 2), yet it is one of the most popular Route 66 stops in Springfield. The physical building has changed, but the family and the business remain the same, reflecting a commercial-business attitude towards authenticity that emphasizes the continuity of the business rather than preservation of physical structures.

Differences in attitudes towards physical authenticity or interpretational veracity of spirit of place may simply reflect a maturation period that the Lincoln sites have had, which the Route 66 sites have yet to enjoy.

Another important factor is that the Lincoln sites came of age during periods of expanding acquisition and funding of state and federal historic sites. Today neither the National Park Service (NPS) nor the State of Illinois are in the process of seeking out new sites. Both have limited resources for running the sites they have. Route 66 historic sites that are not commercial businesses are owned by small towns that are relatively successful in using them to attract tourists. For Route 66, instead of ownership and site management, the National Park Service's involvement has been a salutary stimulus program: a 10 year Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program (due to sunset in 2009). They have had good results by providing grants, technical assistance, developmental guidance, and national leadership.

Individual states, including Illinois, with the help of NPS funding and/or advice, have surveyed resources and have designated sites and roadbed segments of Route 66 to the National Register of Historic Places. The Illinois Historic Preservation Agency conducted a GPS-documented historic roadbed survey of Route 66 this past summer with assistance from the NPS.

Both Route 66 and Lincoln sites tell significant stories of the great American frontier, westward expansion, and personal, recreational, and educational growth and mobility. Lincoln sites benefit from a longer, more widely recognized history combined with federal and state ownership and funding. The Route 66 sites are more in flux. If they overcome today's economic and energy challenges, the commercial businesses and structures of Route 66 will likely achieve a maturation stage of preservation similar to that of the Lincoln sites.

**REFERENCES**

- Ambrose, Patty, Executive Director of Illinois Route 66 Heritage Project, Inc. Interview by author, June 19, 2008.
- Andreasen, Bryon. C. Illinois' Lincoln. Lincoln Land College Elderhostel, Springfield. Lecture June 2, 2008.
- Caton, Kellee, and Carla Almeida Santos. 2007. Heritage Tourism on Route 66: Deconstructing Nostalgia. *Journal of Travel Research* 2007 45 (4): 371.
- Bruner, Edward M.. 2004. *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.
- Jakle, John A., and Keith A. Sculle. 2008. *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Jakle, John. 1996. The Highway in America. *Bulletin of the Illinois Geographical Society* 38 (Fall): 5-12.
- Lindsay, Vachel. 1919. *The Congo and Other Poems*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service Special Resource Study Route 66, July 1995.
- Pessen, Edward. 1984. *The Log Cabin Myth: The Social Backgrounds of the President*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Scott, Quinta and Susan Croce Kelly. 1988. *Route 66: The Highway and Its People*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Sculle, Keith A. 1991. Frank Redford's Wigwam Village Chain. In *Roadside America: The Automobile in Design and Culture*, ed. Jan Jennings, 125-35. Ames: Iowa State University Press. 1991.
- Sculle, Keith A. 1996. The Cultural Origins of the Route 66 Revival. *Bulletin of the Illinois Geographical Society* 38 (Fall): 35-41.
- Steinbeck, John. 1939. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Viking Press.
- Schwartz, Thomas, Illinois State Historian, Interview by author. Springfield, Illinois, 27 June 2008.
- Talley, Richard, email message to author, 15 July 2008.
- Troup, Bobby. "Get Your Kicks on Route 66." Song written in 1946.