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Heritage Tourism on Route 66: Deconstructing Nostalgia

KELLEE CATON AND CARLA ALMEIDA SANTOS

Many scholars have criticized the phenomenon of heritage tourism, arguing that it is driven by nostalgia, the desire on the part of heritage tourists to relive a glorified, misremembered version of the past; however, few studies have examined the actual experiences of heritage tourists. Employing a framework of heuristic inquiry, this study explores nine tourists' experiences traveling along the Route 66 National Historic Corridor, using methodological techniques of in-depth active interviewing, personal reflection, narrative inquiry, and photo elicitation in order to begin to evaluate the explanatory power of nostalgia theory in this context. Study participants identified various meaningful elements of their travel experiences, including historical education, interaction with diverse landscapes, interaction with hosts, and personal growth; however, their experiences did not appear to be characterized by nostalgia, as it is conceptualized in the tourism literature. The study thus emphasizes the importance of considering tourists' interpretations of their experiences when generating theory about tourism phenomena.

Keywords: *Route 66; nostalgia; heritage*

INTRODUCTION

Heritage tourism, which can be defined as tourism that engages with the cultural tradition of a particular location (Kibby 2000), is an important and growing segment of tourism worldwide (Ashworth 2000; Poria, Butler, and Airey 2003; Richards 2000). Heritage tourism resources are often considered to include tangible remains of the past (e.g., artifacts), as well as culturally valued natural areas (e.g., scenic landscapes) and intangible cultural assets (e.g., folk traditions) (Kerstetter, Confer, and Bricker 1998). Whereas there has been much theoretical speculation about tourist experiences (e.g., Cohen 1979, 1988; MacCannell 1976) and about the phenomenon of heritage tourism (e.g., Hewison 1987; Jewell and Crotts 2002; Kibby 2000), little empirical research has focused specifically on the experience of visiting heritage sites (Beeho and Prentice 1997; Masberg and Silverman 1996) or has sought to link empirical findings with theory. Thus, while many theories are purported to be relevant to heritage tourism experiences, rarely have they been explored in the context of actual heritage tourism sites. Consequently, this study employs the approach of heuristic inquiry, using methods of personal reflection, active interviewing, narrative inquiry, and photo elicitation to explore tourists' experiences of visiting a popular American heritage site: the Route 66 National Historic Corridor. The site is then used as a context for beginning to evaluate the explanatory power of nostalgia theory, a theory typically invoked to explain tourism at popular culture heritage sites. Thus, this work contributes broadly to tourism studies by placing an empirical study in conversation with the heritage tourism literature, in order to begin to evaluate the usefulness of a commonly cited theory to explain the phenomenon of heritage tourism as it occurs "on the ground." Additionally, it strives to initiate a more direct discussion than has previously occurred in the literature regarding the utility of nostalgia theory for explaining heritage tourists' experiences, by offering both a conceptual and an empirical critique of this theoretical position. Such a discussion is important because nostalgia theory is a key element of current patterns of reasoning in tourism studies, which have been broadly critical of heritage tourism; if accepted unquestioningly, such patterns of thinking may run the risk of obscuring this phenomenon's value (Crang 1996).

THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Heritage Tourism and Nostalgia

Extant work on heritage tourism has predominantly focused on documenting its significance and economic impact (Taylor, Fletcher, and Clabaugh 1993; Makens 1987), creating typologies of heritage tourists (Chandler and Costello 2002; Kerstetter, Confer, and Graefe 2001; Kerstetter, Confer, and Bricker 1998), discerning motivations for visiting heritage sites (Poria, Reichel, and Biran 2006; Pearce and Lee 2005; Poria, Butler, and Airey 2004), generating advice for practitioners regarding site development and service

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provision (Apostolakis and Jaffry 2005; Wanhill 2000), and exploring the politics of site production and representation (Jeong and Santos 2004; Waitt 2000; Rudd and Davis 1998). A considerably smaller body of research has focused on understanding the *experience* of heritage tourism, and much of this work has specifically emphasized the phenomenon of personal heritage (or legacy) tourism (McCain and Ray 2003; Timothy 1997), exploring people's experiences at sites they deem to be related to their own family history (Poria, Reichel, and Biran 2006). Thus, despite emergent recognition of the importance of the experiential component of the heritage tourism phenomenon (Timothy and Boyd 2003), it remains an understudied concept (Poria, Reichel, and Biran 2006; Masberg and Silverman 1996).

One theory that has received much attention in the literature, especially in reference to sites of importance to popular culture, centers on the notion of nostalgia. Davis (1973) defines nostalgia as being distinctive from other subjective states oriented to the past, such as remembrance and reminiscence, because it is necessarily comparative and value-laden and because it involves the filtering of memories. Nostalgia involves juxtaposing particular constructions of the past with particular constructions of the present, such that the past is associated with positive affects, such as "beauty, pleasure, joy, [and] satisfaction," while the present, by comparison, is viewed as being "more bleak, grim, wretched, ugly, deprivational, unfulfilling, [and] frightening," or, less dramatically, as simply less promising, engaging, and inspiring than the present or imagined future (pp. 14–15). Thus, by definition, nostalgia is "a positively toned evocation of a lived past in the context of some negative feeling toward present or impending circumstance" (p. 18). Scholars who view heritage tourism as being driven by nostalgia use the term in Davis's sense, as a longing for a past (constructed of only positive memories) evoked by discontent or anxiety over present conditions (Dann 1994, p. 65; Hewison 1987, p. 45). However, they extend nostalgia beyond lived experience to include the phenomenon of longing for a culturally remembered past that may have occurred before one's birth and, hence, not have been experienced personally.

Several scholars (e.g., Dann 1994; Hewison 1987) have criticized the recent heritage tourism boom as being driven by nostalgia. Addressing the heritage industry in Great Britain, Hewison (1987) argued that the trend of dramatically increasing preservation and visitation of heritage sites is driven by widespread anxiety on the part of the British people that their country and culture are in decline. Dissatisfaction with the present leads people to indulge in nostalgia by visiting heritage sites, which present them not with representations of the "true past," but with "fantasies of a world that never was" (p. 10). Dann (1994) also attributes much of heritage tourism's popularity to nostalgia. He argues that tourism advertising capitalizes upon people's "dissatisfaction with current social arrangements and concern over their continuation into the future" by using nostalgic text and images to sell destinations (p. 65). People then visit the advertised attractions, which provide them with "what they want to see"—a glorified representation of the past, in which negative historical elements are either missing or stripped of their potency (Dann 1996, p. 220).

Dann (1994) is not alone in implicating destination promotion as a driving force behind the "nostalgiazation" of the heritage tourism experience (Vesey and Dimanche 2003, p. 54). Vesey and Dimanche (2003) argue that "destination image has become central to many tourism locales and historical tourism [uses] nostalgic images to attract those who seek out history for entertainment and leisure" (p. 54). They situate destination promotion within a larger framework of place commodification, in which historic places and events are translated into sets of icons that are used to promote destinations, shape tourist activities, and adorn souvenirs. They argue that the icons chosen reflect "evocative images of what [tourists] wish to experience about the place they are seeking and its past" (Vesey and Dimanche 2003, p. 55). In their view, tourists seek a simplified, romantic version of place and history "without the more difficult aspects of what life was like in the past" and without "the reality of day-to-day life [in] the host destination" (Vesey and Dimanche 2003, p. 55). Thus, heritage destinations are marketed, sold, and consumed via systems of icons that represent particular meanings of place while omitting other meanings.

In addition to demonstrating the extreme overgeneralization (of both tourists and heritage sites) that is the Achilles' heel of all grand social theory, the nostalgia critique, in our view, suffers from several other conceptual problems as well. From a standpoint of ontological relativity, perhaps the most obvious problem is that it rests on the assumption that there is one real history "out there," waiting to be discovered. In other words, it views history as something that exists independent of people's perceptions and interpretations, and posits that there is some authority who can legitimately declare others' views of history as "accurate" or "unduly rosy" (i.e., "nostalgized"). Second, the nostalgia critique implies that tourists evaluate society in an all-or-nothing framework and denies them the capability of assessing individual features of the past and present as desirable or undesirable. Thus, heritage tourists are restricted to viewing the past as either better than the present or worse than the present; they cannot view the past as both better and worse than the present. Furthermore, the nostalgia critique assumes tourists' assessments of the past as better than the present to automatically be the product of irrational emotional attachments, rather than logical reasoning, and to be generally misguided and without merit (and, according to Hewison (1987), even detrimental to society). However, it seems at least logically plausible that some aspects of the past may have been more desirable for society than the corresponding aspects of the present and that tourists who arrive at this conclusion might have done so through logical reasoning regarding perceived benefits and drawbacks. This view would position tourists as active, critical constructors of the present and future, evaluating various aspects of society at different historical moments and assessing their value. Third, the nostalgia critique creates an agency vacuum. As it argues, heritage sites pander to tourists, attracting them by advertising and presenting "what they want to see" (Dann 1996, p. 220). No one on the production end has any agenda other than ensuring that the site receives visitors. This seems strange, given that heritage sites are, by definition, representations of cultural legacies. In turn, the tourist passively accepts what the heritage site presents. This constitutes the totality of his/her experience; he/she is in no way an active agent in shaping the experience while at the site. It is hard to imagine any exchange of cultural information so devoid of agency on both sides. An alternative view would

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see both managers and tourists as active participants in the construction of both the pragmatics and meaning of the heritage tourism experience, much as Chronis (2005) argues in his recent analysis of heritage tourism at Gettysburg.

Previous Empirical Work on Tourists' Experiences at Heritage Sites

Surprisingly, little empirical research exists on tourists' experiences at heritage sites (Poria, Reichel, and Biran 2006). Prentice has conducted studies with several colleagues (Beeho and Prentice 1995, 1997; McIntosh and Prentice 1999; Prentice, Witt, and Hamer 1998) exploring visitor experiences at industrial heritage sites in the United Kingdom, and findings indicate that heritage tourism experiences are more complicated than those who attribute the phenomenon to nostalgia would suggest. Few respondents in the aforementioned studies appeared to be either seeking or experiencing nostalgia when they visited industrial heritage sites; rather, most were motivated to visit by a desire to become more aware of what life was like for industrial workers and their families and/or to learn more about technological changes in industry over time. Most tended to leave the sites not with the "rosy" impressions that would be expected to have been gained from a nostalgic experience, but with the feeling of having gained insight into the hardships of life in an industrial village and the opinion that present-day life represents an improvement over life in the Victorian era. Results also showed that visitors were not passive recipients of heritage tourism experiences. Instead, they were "mindful," in Moscardo's (1996) sense, meaning "active, interested, questioning and capable of reassessing the way they view the world" (p. 382). Furthermore, they often integrated new information with their own memories of personal experiences, thus adding an associative and affective dimension to the cognitive process of being "mindful" (McIntosh and Prentice 1999). McIntosh and Prentice (1999) term the result of this process of mental and emotional learning "insightfulness." Additionally, these studies revealed participants' heritage tourism experiences at the sites in question to be more complex and multifaceted than definitions of heritage tourism that focus solely on traveling to learn about history would suggest. Many participants expressed multiple motivations and enumerated multiple valued outcomes of their visit, which included not only learning about or feeling connected with history, but also enjoying the scenery and local flora and fauna of the grounds on which the heritage attraction was situated and having an opportunity to share an interesting experience with family or friends. The idea that heritage tourism experiences are more complex than nostalgia theory would suggest is also supported by Masberg and Silverman (1996), who found that a sample of undergraduate students described their past heritage tourism experiences as involving learning about history, spending time with traveling companions, interacting with site personnel, and enjoying nature.

By demonstrating that visitors' experiences were multifaceted, rather than solely focused on learning about or connecting with history, and that visitors frequently left sites with an appreciation for the present, rather than a longing for the past, Prentice and his colleagues may have had the last word in the context of British industrial heritage sites; however, nostalgia continues to be invoked to explain tourism at other types of heritage sites, particularly sites related to popular culture (e.g., Kibby 2000). One such site is the Route 66 National Historic Corridor.

The Route 66 National Historic Corridor

Traveling Route 66, often dubbed the Mother Road and the Main Street of America, has been described by many as "the experience of a lifetime" (Steil 2000, p. 7). The only highway to have attained the status of American cultural icon, Route 66's familiar black and white shield is recognized throughout the world (Wallis 2001). It has inspired countless artistic endeavors, including a 66-foot-long painting and a song that has been recorded by over a dozen artists, from Nat King Cole to the Rolling Stones to Depeche Mode, and it holds an important place in the works of such notable literary figures as Jack Kerouac and John Steinbeck. So significant is Route 66 to U.S. cultural history that the Smithsonian's National Museum in Washington D.C. features an exhibit titled "America on the Move," which includes an actual piece of Route 66 pavement.

One of America's first transcontinental highways, Route 66 was the result of the trend of increasing car ownership in America, spurred by Henry Ford's assembly line production of automobiles (Scott and Kelly 1988). Officially established in 1926, Route 66 spanned 2,448 miles, stretching from Chicago to Los Angeles (running through the states of Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California), becoming the first all-weather road from the Midwest to the West Coast, and opening up the Southwest for the first time to migrants, soldiers, and vacationers traveling by automobile. By the 1950s, Route 66 had begun to become a victim of its own popularity. It had already been re-routed in the 1930s, in order to eliminate some unnecessary mileage and shorten the trip for tourists, and it was successively widened in the 1950s and '60s to accommodate greater traffic flows. Upon his return from service in Germany during WWII, President Eisenhower, who had become "smitten by the efficient German autobahn," advocated the creation of a similar highway system in the U.S. (Wallis 2001, p. 25). In 1956, the U.S. Interstate Highway System was initiated with the passage of a new Federal Aid Highway Act, and by the 1970s, sections of Route 66 began to be bypassed by the new high-speed, limited access interstate highways. A grassroots Route 66 preservation movement began even before the road's federal decommissioning in 1985; however, it was in the late 1980s and early 1990s that this movement really gained momentum, with the establishment of official Route 66 associations in all eight states through which the highway passed. In 1990, Congress authorized the National Park Service (NPS) to evaluate Route 66 as a resource for potential conservation and, in 1999, declared it a National Historic Corridor and appropriated a 10-year funding cycle of $10 million to be used to provide cost-sharing grants for preservation and restoration efforts.

Today, although many segments of the road are crumbling due to neglect and exposure to the elements, Route 66 receives thousands of tourists from all over the world. Its corridor contains resources to facilitate a highly diverse set of experiences for visitors. In terms of landscape, Route 66 runs from Lake Michigan to the Pacific Ocean, featuring deserts, mountains, farmlands, small towns, and bustling cities along

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the way. Moreover, the road is colorfully accentuated by various examples of quirky Americana, including locally owned "mom-and-pop" motels and restaurants, museums, souvenir shops, ghost towns, and other assorted roadside curiosities, most of which employ distinctive (and sometimes outlandish) advertising and architectural motifs.

Unfortunately, despite Route 66's popularity and its elevation to the status of "National Historic Corridor," the Route has rarely shown its face in the academic literature, particularly outside the disciplines of history (Dedek 2002) and geography (Brady 1998; Puzo 1988). Only one short book chapter (Kibby 2000) has ever explored any aspect of this heritage site from a tourism perspective, and no empirical studies have been conducted regarding the actual experience of visiting Route 66. The Special Resource Study conducted for Congress by the NPS includes only four pages on the experience of traveling Route 66, and the majority of the text in these pages is devoted to describing the landscape along the corridor. Furthermore, visitors' perspectives were not included in the NPS study, which poses an obvious limitation for gaining an understanding of the Route 66 experience. As is the case with popular culture heritage sites in general, the little academic research that Route 66 has fostered mainly attributes interest in the road to nostalgia. Dedek (2002), for example, argues that nostalgia is the primary impetus behind the "current wave of fascination for Route 66 and the [reason why it] enjoys more national and international attention than any other historic American highway" (p. 209). Through a thematic textual analysis of articles published in *Route 66 Magazine,* he argues that "most . . . involve recollections of a decade . . . that the authors consider to have been a simpler 'lost era,' a more honest and innocent time," and dubs this style of writing "nostalgia literature" (pp. 230–231). The hallmarks of the "lost era" he notes appear to be conservative values, patriotism, and blissful ignorance of the problems faced by members of marginalized social groups, such as black Americans and women. Dedek further argues that promotional Route 66 materials are also steeped in nostalgia, claiming that the road is commonly positioned as a symbol of a "lost, generally happier era in American history" (p. 247). Similarly, in her study regarding the role of the Internet in tourists' visits to Route 66, Kibby (2000) also theorizes about tourist interest in popular culture heritage sites. She states: "Heritage tourism represents a way of recuperating the past for contemporary tourists, and is part of a wider nostalgia for traditional social values, and an appreciation of the way things were, or at least are perceived to have been" and that this "collective nostalgia is usually based on a reconstructed or mis-remembered social past; on an idealized or romanticized history" (p. 40). She then offers Route 66 as an example of a heritage site whose visitors are "in all likelihood motivated by a nostalgia for a popular-culture past" (p. 141). The visitors' desire for nostalgia is fulfilled by their experiences traveling along Route 66, and through their articulation of these experiences, the collective mythology of Route 66 as a symbol of an idealized, romanticized American past is reaffirmed and perpetuated.

Do propositions like Dedek's (2002) and Kibby's (2000) gel with tourists' reports of their actual experiences on Route 66? What are their experiences like, and how well does nostalgia theory explain them? In other words, how well does nostalgia theory function "on the ground"?

METHODOLOGY

Masberg and Silverman (1996), as well as Ingram (2002), have suggested phenomenology as a promising, yet underutilized, tool for understanding tourists' experiences. This study employs heuristic inquiry, a branch of phenomenological inquiry, which emphasizes gaining understanding of the essences of people's lived experiences (Patton 2002). Heuristic inquiry brings the researcher's personal experiences, reflections, and insights to the fore of the project in order to understand the essence of a phenomenon as it is experienced by the researcher and by others who also experience it intensely (Douglass and Moustakas 1985; Patton 2002).

Phenomenological inquiry seemed a natural choice for this project, as the goal was to understand the essence of people's experiences traveling along Route 66. It is also a good fit for our values as researchers, as it emphasizes the quest to understand people's experiences as they make sense of them, rather than attempting to analyze them from a detached, authoritative position. Within phenomenology, heuristic inquiry was also a natural choice, as both authors have personal experience traveling Route 66, and the first author, in particular, lived along the Route for many years and has traveled it repeatedly.

Personal Reflection

As heuristic inquiry involves a researcher deeply exploring his/her own experiences with the researched phenomenon, the first author engaged in much reflection about her extensive Route 66 travels. She began by brainstorming memories of trips taken and creating a list of meaningful memories, which were defined as memories of experiences, she considered to be central to and evocative of her Route 66 journeys. Next, she engaged in discussions with family members and friends with whom she had traveled and asked them to recall favorite memories. With each conversation, new memories were added to the list, and an attempt was made to determine why each experience recalled was important. Scrapbooks and photo albums were also consulted, and this resulted in the addition of more memories to the list.

Active Interviews

In-depth, guided, active interviews were conducted with eight individuals. Active interviews, as conceived by Holstein and Gubrium (1995), are interviews that are conversational in nature, recognize the role of researchers and participants as co-creators of meaning, and take cultivating participants' narrative activity as their primary goal. A guided interview format was chosen so that the general topics of discussion could be directed, in order to produce interview transcripts that could be placed in conversation with each other, while at the same time allowing participants maximum latitude within topic areas (Patton 2002). The interview guide consisted of four questions/topic areas: (1) How did you become interested in traveling Route 66?; (2) Tell me about your trip; (3) What did you find meaningful about traveling Route 66?; and (4) Do you have any hopes or concerns about the future of Route 66? Interviews were conducted by the first author, in English, in the location of the interviewee's choice. Each interview lasted between two

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and fifteen hours, with longer interviews being broken into segments over a period of three consecutive days. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of analysis.

Narrative Inquiry

There has been an increasing interest in the potential of personal narratives to illuminate social phenomena (Polkinghorne 1995). While narratives have been defined differently, they are generally agreed to have certain basic features, including characters, a setting, and a plot. As Riessman (2003) explains, "Narration is distinguished by ordering and sequence; one action is viewed as consequential for the next" (p. 334). Several scholars (e.g., Polkinghorne 1995; Richardson 1990) have argued that narratives are the natural way that people organize the events of their lives into meaningful wholes, and hence, make sense of their experiences. Narrative inquiry is thus an approach that empowers research participants by respecting the way they organize meaning in their lives (Reissman 2003). Furthermore, because narratives are so central to the way people understand their realities, they can offer "especially translucent windows" into personal and cultural meanings of various events and phenomena (Patton 2002, p. 116). The first two topic areas from the interview guide overtly encouraged answers in narrative form. Each participant recalled the story of how he/she had become interested in traveling Route 66, and each told the story of his/her trip. When recounting the stories of their trips, however, participants' master narratives sometimes lost their chronological form. This happened because one memory would sometimes trigger another memory of an experience that had not occurred sequentially but that was related to the first memory thematically. Sometimes, the memories mentioned were from different trips, as the participants had visited the corridor multiple times. Overall, however, when the participants had finished relating their experiences and they were asked to summarize what Route 66 and the experience of traveling it meant to them, they tended to return to their master narratives, bringing the experience together into a grand conclusion of what they felt they had gained from the trip.

Photo-Elicitation

Photo-elicitation has been described as the process of inserting photographs into a research interview (Harper 2002). Scholars who have used photo-elicitation as a research tool have argued that the use of participants' pictures in interviews can help to sharpen their memories and make it easier for them to communicate these memories to the researcher (Harper 2002). In addition, the use of photos in interviews has also been noted to reduce interviewee fatigue (Colliers 1957 cited in Harper 2002) and to ease rapport between the researcher and participants by lessening the awkwardness of the interview situation (Clarke-Ibáñez 2004). In this study, participants were asked in advance to bring to the interview any photographs taken during their travels that they felt comfortable sharing; five of the eight participants chose to do so, and the images they provided were used to elicit their thoughts and memories. In each case in which photographs were used, the interview began with a conversation about the participant's experiences, and then the photographs were introduced into the interview midway through. In addition to photographs, some of the interview participants also chose to share other items that helped to facilitate reflection and discussion, such as scrapbooks and print articles.

Selection of Participants

The authors specifically sought to interview participants for whom traveling Route 66 had been a highly meaningful experience. All exploratory studies must start somewhere, and since this project sought to understand tourists' experiences as they make sense of them, it was determined that studying travel meanings of those for whom a particular type of travel was most meaningful would yield the most depth. Indeed, the selected sample of participants provided the researchers with rich and lengthy insights that were later placed in conversation with nostalgia theory's underlying assumptions in order to begin to assess the theory's robustness.

Approximately one-half of today's Route 66 tourists come from northern Europe, while those in the remaining half are mostly American (Wallis 2001). In choosing interview participants, this diversity was reflected, in the hope that it would add depth to the study. To access northern Europeans who had traveled Route 66, e-mails were sent to the listed contact persons on the official Web sites of the Route 66 associations of the Netherlands, Belgium, and Norway. Additionally, the owner of a German business that offers Route 66 motorcycle tours was contacted. Two of the contact persons agreed to be interviewed, and one additionally agreed to recommend other potential participants. Route 66 organization Web sites were used to seek study participants because it was assumed that such organizations would likely be filled with individuals to whom Route 66 was highly meaningful. To access Americans who had traveled Route 66, the authors relied on snowball sampling, in which personal contacts recommended acquaintances who had traveled Route 66 multiple times and who appeared to have found the experience meaningful. In the end, a total of five Europeans (one German and four Norwegians) and three Americans were interviewed. Additionally, personal reflections were provided by the first author (as per heuristic inquiry methodology), who is American, bringing the total number of American participants to four. Each participant had traveled the road multiple times, with some making several trips a year. Participants included three women and five men, age 25 to 50. Their occupations included business owner, homemaker, college professor, and engineer. All of the participants have been assigned pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

All transcripts were read and analyzed independently by both authors to facilitate an in-depth discussion of the findings. To answer the research questions, this study used a combination of case and pattern analysis. Each author began by creating a "shorthand case study," or a case study in outline form, of each participant's experiences. As explained by Patton (2002), case analysis involves creating a comprehensive, in-depth record of each unit of the phenomenon in question (in this situation, each participant's set of Route 66 experiences), and then analyzing that record to gain an understanding of that particular case. This process constituted an exercise of pattern analysis within the case, as each of the authors tried to grasp the heart of what had been meaningful

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about the experience for the participant and why. Next, the degree to which nostalgia theory seemed to explain the participant's experience was evaluated, and notes were made. After each case was analyzed individually, a process of comparison and negotiation among the authors' findings resulted in further refinements. Next, the resulting outlines were set side by side for comparison. Many patterns across cases were noted, both in terms of what the participants had found meaningful about their experiences, and in terms of nostalgia theory's ability to explain their experiences. Finally, it is important to note that much of the first part of the analysis was done on an on-going basis, so that each transcript was analyzed before subsequent interviews were conducted; this process was repeated until the authors arrived at a point of saturation. In other words, in collecting and interpreting data, over time, we reached a point of diminishing returns; when this occurred, we ceased interviewing.

ELEMENTS OF THE ROUTE 66 EXPERIENCE

Gaining Historical Insight

First, and perhaps most obvious, traveling Route 66 involves gaining historical insight. Travel brochures for Route 66 typically emphasize the corridor as a place where tourists can learn about several aspects of American history, including the evolution of road-building practices, the evolution of vernacular architectural styles, the history of American westward migration, and the changing form of U.S. urban areas. Additionally, because Route 66 is a corridor, rather than a single site, it is comprised of smaller regional and local units, each with its own distinct history. Not surprisingly then, the participants expressed an interest in history as a motivating factor of their Route 66 travels and thought they had gained historical insight from the experience in accord with their own areas of interest. Rob, Carol, and Ionis each discussed the many ways they took advantage of opportunities Route 66 presented for learning about history. First, they gained knowledge by reading and observing. For instance, Rob noted: "I have an extensive Route 66 book collection, and so, you know, I had read the books before we went and . . . it was kind of interesting to see what you'd read and seen in books and to actually see it." He pointed out the informative placards in several pictures he had taken of old bridges along Route 66. Carol also noted these signs and said they had helped her make sense of the way the bridges fit into history, in terms of evolving transportation technology. There were also discussions regarding learning about architecture. Carol stated, "It was interesting to see how the interpretation of art deco changed from Illinois to California. When you think of art deco you think of South Beach, Miami, kind of one look, but it wasn't . . . There were local interpretations." Rob and Carol also thought they had gained historical insight through direct personal experience. An example is revealed in one reflection offered by Carol:

> There was this one place where the whole town was deserted . . . You felt like you were alone, and for me, I tried to imagine back in the thirties or something going across country, and of course they didn't have modern vehicles—just to try to put yourself there. For me, that was the most interesting [thinking about] just the vastness of it. How big the country is. How far it must have seemed.

The European participants also discussed gaining historical insight as an important element of their travels. Both Liv and Baer B. thought that an interest in history was a major motivating factor not only for themselves, but also for many of the people who had traveled in their group. Like the Americans, the Europeans interviewed also thought that their opportunities for learning about history had not been limited to the lectures they attended and exhibits they viewed, while traveling along the corridor. Specifically, they mentioned gaining historical insight as a function of their chosen mode of transportation. Riding through the Mojave Desert on a motorcycle, unprotected from the heat, led Baer B. to wonder "how the older cars ever made it without destroying their radiators" and noted that it wouldn't be a nice place to be stuck for people whose cars had broken down. They also discussed the heat tourists must have experienced in the era before cars were equipped with air conditioning and noted that they had come to understand why, historically, many people had chosen to drive the desert stretches of Route 66 at night. Liv noted that after having had the experience of traveling these segments by motorcycle, trying everything she could imagine to stay cool (including wrapping soaking wet towels around her neck and putting ice cubes inside her clothes and boots), she thought she could relate in some small way to some of the challenges faced by travelers of the past.

Driving

Those interviewed noted that an important feature of Route 66 is the unusual type of driving experience it offers. During the era when Route 66 was constructed, road-building technology was relatively primitive. It was not cost efficient, and sometimes not even possible, to route roads over, under, or through large natural features (Wallis 2001). Furthermore, it would have constituted bad planning. Jakle (1985) quotes planners Nolen and Hubbard (1937), who wrote: "In gradient and alignment the road should lie comfortably upon the topography, appearing to occupy a miraculously favorable natural location rather than to be cruelly forced through against the 'lay of the land' " (p. 43). Nevertheless, the conveniences promised by technological innovations in road building led Americans to champion function at the expense of form, and so began an "endless clamor for utilitarian roadscapes" (Jakle 1985, p. 143). There was a price to be paid for the convenience afforded by the interstates, however: many tourists ceased to connect with the territory through which they drove. The interstates that replaced Route 66 and other early highways were largely insensitive to the landscape, boring through mountains, chiseling away buttes, and leaving drivers with a visual experience so monotonous that it actually became dangerous, as it encouraged drivers to speed, or alternatively, to fall asleep at the wheel (Jakle 1985; Wallis 2001).

Older highways like Route 66 represent an opportunity for tourists to experience the landscape in a more intimate way and to involve their bodies more fully in the driving experience. All those interviewed noted this aspect of the Route 66 experience; in fact, for most, the act of driving

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under such conditions seemed to be the central feature of the trip. Rob, for instance, talked about how he had originally become interested in traveling Route 66 largely because of his enjoyment of taking road trips, and he explained that he had particularly wanted to drive a two-lane road. He also noted that Route 66 provided good conditions for traveling in an open-topped vehicle—in his case, a 1993 Alfa Spyder convertible—because he could drive at a relaxing pace. Unlike many other highways of its type, Route 66 is no longer a commissioned highway, so few people travel it for long distances other than Route 66 tourists. Hence, it is rarely crowded with people who are in a hurry to be somewhere else. Carol, Ionis, and the first author also thought the lack of traffic and low speed limits they encountered enabled them to relax and enjoy the sensory aspects of the drive, such as "the feel of the air" and the "360 degree view."

In addition to having comparatively low traffic volumes, Route 66 is rather unique among highways of its kind because it passes through such a rich variety of natural landscapes as it makes its way from Chicago to Los Angeles. According to National Park Service statistics, the Route 66 corridor encompasses seven distinct natural resource regions, each with its own particular climate, topography, soil, vegetation, and wildlife. Thus, tourists who make the trip in one to two weeks find that the landscape changes dramatically almost daily. All of those interviewed felt the changing landscapes were a very important aspect of the trip and made frequent references to them, such as Ike's comment: "We ride a very long stretch of Highway 66 in Oklahoma. I like it because of the red earth." As Baer B. said, "It's just exciting, crossing America from the east to the west. Just the idea of crossing not a *country* but a *continent* and experiencing such incredibly different landscapes from day to day is tremendous."

Visiting Unique Places

The third key element of the Route 66 experience involved not the road itself, but the elements along it. For these interviewees, a large part of the charm of Route 66 stemmed from the vast assortment of amazing and amusing attractions, both natural and human-made, that the corridor houses. Stopping to visit natural wonders, idiosyncratic tourist attractions, and businesses with unique signature appearances or practices was a very important part of the trip. All the participants mentioned visiting natural wonders that lie along the corridor, especially the Grand Canyon, as a favorite trip activity. Baer B.'s description of his experience at the Grand Canyon exemplifies the sentiments expressed by each of the tourists interviewed: "It was just amazing. When you stand on the edge, and you look, it's so tremendous, you can't swallow it all. It's overwhelming." Several of the European tourists also mentioned visiting the Blue Hole, an artesian well in Santa Rosa, New Mexico. Almost as deep as it is wide and filled with intensely blue-green water, the Blue Hole is a rather surreal sight in its high desert surroundings. The participants found the geology of this attraction fascinating, but they were even more enamored with the opportunity it provided to splash around in the cold water after a long, hot day on their motorcycles. The comments of Ike and Bear B., noted in the previous section, regarding their appreciation of the landscapes along Route 66 also reinforced the notion that visiting unique natural places was an important part of the experience for this group of tourists.

In his book *Route 66: The Empires of Amusement,* Repp (1999) chronicles the sideshow-style attractions that historically peppered the corridor, such as the Jesse James Wax Museum and the Reptile Ranch, and views their popularity with tourists as a logical outgrowth of late nineteenth and early twentieth century America's infatuation with circuses, carnivals, and boardwalk-style amusement parks. This infatuation is apparently still alive and well today, as the attractions of this variety that remain were quite popular with the participants. Most of them recounted experiences at the Blue Whale, a enormous concrete sculpture that lies alongside the Route in Catoosa, Oklahoma; Cadillac Ranch, a sculpture created by eccentric artist Stanley Marsh, who commissioned the partial burial of 10 vintage Cadillacs near Amarillo, Texas, in the 1970s and left an open invitation for passers-by to embellish the above-ground portions of the cars with personalized designs; and the "ghost town" of Oatman, Arizona, where staged shootouts between the sheriff and a local band of bank robbers occur several times daily.

Repp (1999) distinguishes Route 66 businesses that were established solely to entertain tourists from those that were created to provide "necessary travel services" (i.e., motels, restaurants), describing the former as roadside attractions. However, this division is not as clear as it might seem. For the most part, the motels, restaurants, and service stations that operate along Route 66 predate the practice of franchising and its strategy of "place–product–packaging," which relies on uniformity of design and service to communicate reliability and quality (Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers 1996). With no corporate logo to endorse them, these "mom-and-pop" businesses have to be creative in order to attract customers. Toward this end, they employ numerous tactics, most of which involve capitalizing on local lore and landscapes (including particular representations of ethnic groups like Native Americans and Hispanics) and exercising wild hyperbole. They communicate their unique identities through outlandish building designs and/or signage, through claims made on billboards and menus, and through unusual sales and service practices. Examples include the Wigwam Motel in Holbrook, Arizona, which consists of a set of eight freestanding concrete teepee-shaped buildings that function as motel rooms; the Iceburg gas station in Albuquerque, a service station with a building design that echoed its name (and one that sought to attract attention through contrast, rather than congruence, with the local landscape); and Ted Drewes' Custard Stand in St. Louis, where extra-thick milkshakes called "concretes" are handed to customers upside-down to demonstrate their consistency. Thus, visiting Route 66 businesses to procure "necessary travel services" has always involved an element of entertainment.

The participants enthusiastically offered stories about their experiences with Route 66 business establishments. Seemingly mundane activities like taking an evening meal became entertaining adventures because of the creative marketing strategies employed by the businesses. A favorite example was clearly The Big Texan Steak Ranch, a roadside steakhouse in Amarillo that advertises a free 72-ounce steak (also called "The Big Texan") to anyone who can eat it (along with a litany of side dishes) within one hour. Contestants sit on a platform at the front of the restaurant under a large clock, and their dining task becomes an amusing spectacle for the other patrons. Thus, an ordinary life activity, dining in a restaurant, becomes highly interesting

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because it involves not simply food, but novelty, humor, sociability, deviation from ordinary social norms regarding gluttonous behavior, performance, and challenge; in short, it becomes an adventure.

Those interviewed did not enjoy visiting Route 66's attractions solely because they found them entertaining, however. They also seemed to think that the attractions represented something that was missing in the geography and consumer alternatives of their ordinary lives and vacation experiences: uniqueness and individuality. For the Americans, traveling Route 66 seemed to represent an escape from the ubiquitous corporate presence that dominates their everyday landscapes and consumer experiences, rendering them generic and monotonous. Each noted that they had tried to "avoid chain restaurants and motels" and, instead, visit "unique local businesses." For the Europeans, the idiosyncratic, locally owned businesses/attractions represented a said of America they thought had been lacking in other U.S. tourist destinations. They said that many parts of America had become "corporate" and "generic," solely motivated by profit, but that Route 66 was different. As Liv said:

> There's nothing fake there . . . There's just real stuff. You can go and have a lot of fun and go to Disney World and see big shows in New York, but it's not the same. I guess there are shows [on Route 66], like in Oatman, but it's different to me. These guys that do this [wild west] show, they *live* in Oatman. I think one is even the mayor. And the money they make, it goes to a children's hospital. You know, it makes it a lot more real.

Interacting with People

Participants emphasized interacting with people they met along the road as a particularly meaningful element of the trip. Ike commented: "A very special thing [is that] on Route 66 you are always meeting people. You get a lot of friends." Arkin also mentioned this: "When [I'm] on Route 66, I would say that my first priority is meeting people . . . And then next, maybe, the places? . . . but foremost it's the people." The participants felt that they had genuinely connected with people along the road. They viewed the people they met as honest and open and felt that their interest in meeting tourists stemmed not from a desire for financial gain, but from an innate sense of hospitality and curiosity and a sincere enjoyment of interacting with others. Their encounters did not feel scripted, but spontaneous and from the heart. In an era in which many tourism experiences are perceived as standardized, commoditized, and characterized by rigid social role imposition, the absence of these qualities along Route 66 seemed markedly noticeable to these tourists.

In addition to discussing the people of Route 66 in general terms, participants told many stories of specific interactions they had found especially meaningful on their trips. These stories seemed to have particular unifying elements that illustrated the kinds of social encounters the participants had experienced and why they valued them. First, several of the stories told involved individuals who had provided services for tourists with little or no concern for economic profit. The interviewees seemed to interpret the lack of a profit motive as an indication of the service providers' sincerity and intrinsic motivation to interact with them. For example, Baer B. related the following story:

> This lady made sandwiches for everybody [in our group]. [She made] like 50 sandwiches and made nametags for every sandwich in Norwegian; she found out how to write the names in Norwegian . . . through the Internet . . . This lady had made [sandwiches] for a group of 26 hungry people—you know, she made a *lot* of sandwiches—and I said, "Where can I pay?" [And she said], "Pay? No, I don't want any money." [So I said], "Of course, you have to have some money for all of this. It's 26 hungry guys here, you know. It's a lot of food." [She said], "No, no." She didn't want to hear of letting me pay.

Similarly, Liv discussed her encounter with the late Juan Delgadillo, a long famous presence on Route 66. Juan and his brother Angel were octogenarian Route 66 activists and entrepreneurs. Angel, "the kind brother," runs a barbershop in Seligman, Arizona. The barbershop is filled with Route 66 memorabilia relating to Angel's active role in the preservation movement (he was an original founder and is president emeritus of the Arizona Route 66 Association). An equally important tourist attraction is the Dead Chicken Diner, located next door to Angel's barbershop and operated for many years by Juan, "the mischievous brother." Visitors to the diner typically found Juan behind the counter, masterminding a continuous assault of practical jokes on his patrons. Juan's arsenal included plastic insects that randomly turned up on people's cheeseburgers, mustard bottles that shot in the wrong direction, and many other devices that alarmed and delighted customers. Liv commented on Juan's style of interaction:

> He spends so much time with everybody—with each person. I mean, he plays lots of tricks on each person. He has a line out the door of people waiting to order. He could get a lot more people through, but he doesn't. I know it's part of his business to play tricks on people, but he doesn't have to spend *so much time* on each person.

Liv viewed the time and attention Juan lavished on each patron as indicative of his intrinsic motivation to interact with them. The fact that he could have served more customers and, hence, turned more profit but chose not to, indicated to her that generating revenue was not his primary goal; instead he sincerely enjoyed interacting with his visitors, and that made the experience more meaningful for her.

Participants also emphasized the importance of serendipity in shaping their social interactions along Route 66. They often met new people through shared connections in an extensive social grapevine, or because of unforeseen circumstances in the physical environment, such as problematic weather or road conditions. Thus, many of their interactions with people were spontaneous and serendipitous in nature. For instance, some of the Norwegian participants mentioned a group of people they had met on Route 66 through a lucky connection facilitated by Baer N.'s wife, who had lived with a family in Tulsa, Oklahoma, as a high school exchange student 20 years before. When she called her host family and told them that a group of Norwegian motorcycle tourists

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would be traveling through Tulsa on a Route 66 tour, her host mother contacted a local acquaintance, Susanna Wallis, wife of Michael Wallis, a famous Route 66 historian and author, and the two of them organized an event in which area residents made lunch for the tour group at a local church and shared their stories about living along the road.

However, despite all the wonderful memories recounted, the people of Route 66 aren't perfect. They have good days and bad days like anyone else. Most of them seem generally friendly, while others are well known for being surly. Ike and the first author shared a laugh about the cook at a popular lunch restaurant on Route 66, whom Ike described as "always grumpy," and the author shared a story about how she had seen this cook chase a group of film students who were trying to shoot footage of the restaurant's sign off of the property, yelling and flailing his arms wildly as he ran them out. Also, many of the people who operate businesses along Route 66 are elderly and are increasingly facing health problems that affect everything from their mobility to their moods. While some Route 66 tourists are less than understanding about this, the participants in this study did not express criticism about the imperfections of people they met along the road; rather, they felt that the multidimensionality of the people they met on Route 66 was precisely what they appreciated about them. As Liv commented, "The people [of Route 66] are just so real. There's nothing fake about them." Arkin agreed: "They're just people. That's what makes it great."

Participants also frequently mentioned their interactions with fellow tourists as a meaningful aspect of the experience. Most notably, they commented on the bonds they formed with their traveling companions, even when this outcome seemed unlikely from the trip's outset. For example, Baer N. explained that the group with which he had traveled was comprised of members who ranged from millionaires to individuals who had rarely traveled outside of Norway and who had to take second jobs shearing sheep in order to save money for the trip. He said, "We met at the airport, and . . . [we had] these kind of *different* people . . . but after one day on Harley, everyone was just the same. It's one team, and here we go!" Participants who traveled in large groups were not the only ones who mentioned bonding with their companions. Rob and Carol, who took the trip as a twosome, noted the benefits of traveling together for their relationship. Carol commented that she thought the trip had brought them closer together and left them desiring to take more road trips together.

Undertaking an Odyssey

An odyssey seems a particularly adept metaphor for the Route 66 experience because it combines the ideas of adventure, challenge, cooperation, serendipity, reflection, and personal growth, all of which were mentioned frequently in the participants' narratives. Perhaps the interviewees didn't experience anything as dramatic as an encounter with a cyclops, but the stories they shared clearly revealed the way their trips challenged them, placed them in novel situations, and led them to think about things they had never considered before. As Ike pointed out, traveling Route 66, especially by motorcycle, is not "a normal vacation." It takes a lot of effort to cover so much ground in such a short time. Liv explained: "It is a lot of work. When I come home . . . , I'm really, really, really tired. I'm exhausted." The sheer physical demands of riding a motorcycle from Chicago to Los Angeles can present a formidable challenge for some. As Liv explained:

> The challenge is to sit on the bikes and ride Route 66 all the way. A lot of . . . people [in our group] maybe should have gotten off their bikes, sat in the van and cooled off. Some people get sick . . . a lot of people get eye problems, because of the air, and they should have been in the van, but they weren't. No way you could get them off their bikes, because then they haven't ridden all the way from LA to Chicago.

Ike shared similar sentiments. He explained that many of the people who participate in his tours are older business managers who are used to spending time indoors, flexing only their mental muscles. Many have never ridden motorcycles prior to their Route 66 tour. As Ike noted, the trip gives these unlikely adventurers the opportunity to stretch beyond their normal comfort zone, challenge themselves, and defy the expectations of those around them.

The challenge of traveling Route 66 by motorcycle can be compounded by bad weather. Powerful thunderstorms can arise quickly and unexpectedly, especially on the desert stretches of the road, and in some areas, the nearest shelter may be several miles away. Ike shared a story about being caught in a violent thunderstorm in the middle of a long stretch in rural New Mexico. He explained that he had literally been afraid for his life, that it had taken all his skills to keep his motorcycle upright and on the road, and that he was so shaken and overwhelmed by the experience that it led him to reevaluate his priorities and, ultimately, to reshape his life and his relationship to nature. He referred to the incident as "the change of my life."

In addition to facing the challenges of the road, the participants also grew as a result of their interactions with their traveling companions, as well as through encounters with people they met along the road, which often led them to consider things they had never thought about before. For example, while the Norwegians found most people along Route 66 to be friendly and welcoming, American stereotypes, which cast motorcycle riders as rebellious and dangerous, sometimes caused the group to be perceived negatively. Liv discussed this phenomenon through stories of the group's experiences and noted its novelty for her. Her stories were quite humorous and provoked raucous laughter, but it was clear that she had reflected seriously on them:

> We came into a Taco Bell one time . . . There were a lot of people in there, but they just left. We pulled up on 22 bikes, and we suddenly saw a lot of people leaving, but there was one guy [who came in] . . . this one guy and his wife. [He] approached us [and said], "I noticed that you couldn't be Hell's Angels[1] for two reasons: Because all the bikes were so neatly parked and [there were] no police" [laughter]. So they dared to come in there. He was a professional clown; that was his work [wild laughter]. He was the only one who dared to come in. There were 26 of us and 2 of them, 1 clown and his wife [more wild laughter].

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The tone became more serious as Liv continued.

> We go in black t-shirts, and we look kind of scary. [I] remember the time we stopped to ask a nice lady the way, and her child was out on the swings swinging in the yard, and she took her child and just [Liv motions whisking the child inside]. I took off my helmet. I knew that maybe we looked scary, so I took off my helmet to show her before I came over to her that I was a woman, but she still ran in the house . . . It's kind of a weird experience. I've never experienced that before—that someone's afraid of me . . . I guess that's a pretty new experience for a woman.

Several others also recalled social encounters that caused them to reflect and gain new insights, including the first author, who noted conversations in her personal reflections that had led her to ponder about the privileges and challenges she experiences, about her character and values, and about the choices she makes in daily life.

NOSTALGIA THEORY AND THE ROUTE 66 EXPERIENCE

After analyzing the narratives of the study participants, we conclude that nostalgia theory does not encapsulate their experiences for four reasons. First, participants did not appear to hold a predominately past-oriented view of the site. Second, to the extent that history was a salient element of the experience for participants, none of them seemed to come away from the trip with a "rosy" view of the past. Third, rather than seeking and experiencing familiarity along Route 66, participants sought and experienced challenge and personal growth. Finally, participants revealed themselves to be active constructors of their experiences, rather than passive recipients of information.

"We Don't Just Go for the History": Present-Centered Orientations

The participants in this study did not appear to hold a predominately past-oriented view of Route 66, but instead saw the corridor as an evolving place, with much of its meaning and value stemming from its current elements and the experiences they facilitate. As noted previously, such experiences include driving a quiet, two-lane road with richly varied scenery; visiting unique and quirky places; and interacting with new people or with familiar people in new ways. Clearly, these experiences are tied to history, in the sense that the characteristics of the road and the establishments along it are the direct result of particular historical conditions. However, the meaning of traveling Route 66 for participants seemed not to lie primarily in the knowledge that the experience was grounded in history in some way, although this contributed to some extent, as they enjoyed the feeling of participating in a living legacy of travel along an historic highway. Rather, participants seemed to view the meaning of Route 66 as lying predominantly in the actual visceral experience of driving the road, seeing the landscape, feeling the wind, laughing at the giant sombreros and concrete cacti that adorn Route 66 restaurants and motels, gorging on gargantuan steaks, and talking with people who have made a life out of performing passable renditions of folk songs for tourists or surreptitiously slipping plastic spiders onto their sandwiches. The stories they told focused on these kinds of occurrences and on what it was like to experience them firsthand, rather than on the relationship of these occurrences to the past. As Baer N. explained, "We like history, but we don't just go for the history. Route 66 is about driving, fun, excitement."

The participants also did not indicate that they viewed their experiences on Route 66 as replicas of experiences available in earlier decades or as representative of life in America in earlier decades, as Dedek's (2002) study of *Route 66 Magazine* articles concluded. Indeed, in most cases, such experiences could not have been facilitated by Route 66 in the era in which it was a commissioned highway. For example, throughout much of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, Route 66 was choked with traffic. Some of the participants mentioned that the experience of driving unhindered on the open road that they found to be so relaxing, enjoyable, and safe for motorcyclists would not have been possible if Route 66 were still "the Way West" for the majority of tourists. If Route 66 were still heavily traveled, one would also be unlikely to easily find a motel room or an uncrowded diner on the first try, an opportunity prized by some of the tourists in this study. Additionally, most of the specific individuals living and working along the Route, who participants mentioned as making the experience particularly special for them, were too young to have been a part of the corridor when Route 66 was a commissioned highway. Thus, while the participants saw themselves as participating in a legacy of travel, they did not seem to confuse the experiences available today with those available in the past or to indicate that they were less valuable than those available in the past. Rather, they saw the corridor as an evolving place that offers a different, and highly valuable, set of experiences for tourists today than it offered in the past.

In addition, participants also seemed to be generally at peace with the inevitability of change as it relates to the corridor. This was indicated through comments like Baer N.'s during a discussion about how many of the people who lived and worked along Route 66 in its commissioned era have recently passed away:

> When the old people are dying, you have to find a new way to tell the history. But it could make it even more exciting, because, you know, you could get people with a real interest in Route 66 to come in and run the places. Like if you go today, it's great. You meet a lot of new—a lot of young—people telling you about history. They're really concerned about it; they're proud about it. It's great. I mean, I don't only care about meeting people born 100 years ago . . . You have to bring [history] through every generation.

Rob also expressed his acceptance of inevitable change, when he discussed some of the people and resources that have been lost over time:

> In some ways, it's similar to the railroads, you know? There's not much left really . . . The railroads were in

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> their heyday in the late nineteenth century, and now there's just nobody left. So, you know, that's part of life, part of civilization. It just passes. So I guess I don't get too upset about it. I do think the roadbed could be better preserved, though.

He also discussed change along the corridor, in terms of new structures being added to the landscape: "Of course it's going to change over time. It's good to see new commerce that sustains the road. I wouldn't want them to build a Wal-Mart on it, but it's good to see new people getting involved, opening businesses." Arkin felt similarly:

> I wouldn't want it to turn into a new Disneyland of the Southwest, where you just get on the tram in Chicago and get off in Los Angeles. I'm concerned about it becoming sort of more than it is in that way. I wouldn't want it to lose its character and uniqueness. I do want more people to be able to experience it though, so that might require more infrastructure than there is now, if it keeps [gaining] popularity.

Nostalgia theory does not recognize a broad range of meanings and benefits to be associated with heritage sites. Instead, it conceptualizes them narrowly, as places where travelers go to experience a glorified version of history, to ease their anxieties over what they perceive to be a woebegotten present (Hewison 1987). Under such a conceptualization, heritage sites should be locked in an imaginary version of the past, rather than being dynamic and evolving, and tourists should prefer it that way. That these participants emphasized the sensory, social, and developmental aspects of their Route 66 travels as much as the historical aspects, and that they could identify and appreciate changes along the corridor, suggests that nostalgia theory is insufficient to explain their experiences.

No Rose-Colored Windshield: Lack of Distorted Distillation of History

All of the participants expressed an interest in history as one of the motivating factors for traveling Route 66 and thought they had gained historical insight from the experience. However, when reasoning about history, none of the participants seemed to engage in practices of selection and distillation to arrive at a generalized view of the past, as nostalgia theory claims (Hewison 1987; Vesey and Dimanche 2003). They did not seem to come away with a solely positive view of the past as it relates to Route 66, to compare the present unfavorably to the past, or even to make generalizations about either the past or present at all. Rather, when discussing the past and present, they tended to focus on specific elements of each and compare them through a logical analysis of their benefits and drawbacks. They also did not view the past and present as mutually exclusive; rather, they recognized continuity (i.e., they saw civilization as constantly under revision) and believed that particular elements of value from the past could be retained alongside or combined with newer developments to achieve optimal utility. Such ideas contradict the contention of the nostalgia critique that heritage tourists reject the present in favor of a glorified version of the past and that their visits to heritage sites reinforce these views. They also contradict the critique's underlying assumption that heritage tourists hold predominately generalized views of the past and present, rather than viewing each as a conglomeration of conditions, practices, and so on, which can be evaluated somewhat independently and employed in various combinations.

Let us illustrate more specifically. Participants viewed Route 66 as a symbol of the importance of automobile travel to life in twentieth-century America, but made no sweeping, value-laden judgments about life in America in the past, and did not valorize Route 66 as being representative of any perceived American values in the way that the contributors to *Route 66 Magazine,* cited in Dedek's (2002) study, seemed to. No comments were made that reflected associations of Route 66 with innocence, honesty, respectfulness, or patriotism. The reason for this may lie in the age range and nationalities of the study participants; perhaps associations between Route 66 and nostalgic perceptions of American culture in earlier decades are only salient for individuals who lived in America during those decades. However, given that nostalgia has less to do with individuals' previous personal experiences than with their search for glorified representations of the past that support particular values and ideologies they associate with the earlier eras and perceive to be disappearing in modernity, and given that the nostalgia critique has frequently been lobbed at heritage sites with subject matter that predates the lives of most current visitors, the fact that study participants did not appear to read Route 66 as an all-encompassing symbol for a generalized, romanticized view of life in America in earlier eras still represents an important challenge to the nostalgia critique as a robust explanation of the heritage tourism experience.

When participants did comment about history, they tended to focus on particular aspects of it, such as the kinds of automotive technology that would have been available at certain points in history, or the social circumstances that would have compelled people to travel on Route 66, or the challenges and rewards associated with running a business on Route 66. Furthermore, none of the participants seemed to have emerged from the trip with a particularly "rosy" impression of history, as it relates to Route 66. None of them glorified the era when Route 66 was a commissioned road (1926–1984), or any of the decades within that era. Often the insights they gained while driving or viewing Route 66 displays at museums or business establishments involved the hardships of travel on Route 66 in earlier decades. Rob, for example, mentioned this repeatedly:

> You know, it was tough with the kind of [automotive] technology they had then. They could only go 70 to 100 miles a day sometimes. Cars would break down. It wasn't easy. I remember seeing pictures and stuff about this in the Midpoint Café.

Later he noted that the trip must have been challenging in earlier decades "because of the technology of the cars, and you know how much your kidneys could stand because the suspensions were so bad." Carol also mentioned her reflections on early travel on Route 66 when she discussed visiting an abandoned town and feeling as if she could imagine how empty Route 66 must have felt along its sparsely populated desert stretches, and how crossing such a vast country

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with limited automotive technology must have seemed a formidable task. The Norwegian participants also commented on the insight they said they had gained into the hardships of travel in earlier decades, particularly regarding the difficulty of crossing the Mojave Desert. There were also discussions about the challenges of running a Route 66 business. They were amazed at the risk that many Route 66 entrepreneurs had taken, moving their families to new towns and investing all their money to develop a business that was not guaranteed to be a success, and they commented on how hard it must have been for such people when Route 66 was bypassed by interstate highways, as evidenced by the current economically depressed state of many small towns along the corridor.

Participants did praise certain historical aspects of Route 66, but not to the detriment of their present counterparts. For example, they considered old highways like Route 66 to be valuable for the unique type of driving experience they facilitate, but found modern interstate highways to be valuable, too. As Rob noted, "I'm grateful for the interstates when I need to get somewhere, but Route 66 is something of value, too." Ionis also mentioned that the creation of interstate highways was a crucial factor in making Route 66 the relaxing driving experience it is today; were it not for the development of an alternative way to drive from Chicago to Los Angeles, Route 66 would still be choked with traffic. Both Arkin and Ike noted that interstate highways make it possible for them to offer shorter Route 66 tours for people who lack the time or money to take longer trips; these shorter tours focus on riding particular segments of Route 66 and take advantage of the speed and convenience of the interstates to move between these segments. Arkin also compared old Route 66 business establishments to more modern travel services that have sprung up in Route 66 towns and commented that each is valuable:

> The older businesses give the Route its character, but the newer ones are larger, which is good for us. We can't stay as a group of 40 people in the smaller motels, and sometimes we have to compromise and eat fast food because there isn't enough time to stop and go inside and sit down and eat for *every* meal . . . sometimes we need things that are convenient and quick. Then we can have more time when we stop at some of the older businesses.

Thus, rather than viewing current systems as inferior to their earlier counterparts and broadly rejecting them in favor of a return to the past, participants seemed inclined to consider the value of elements from both the past and the present and to focus on the benefits derived from combining them.

Like those interviewed, the first author also feels she has never come away from a trip on Route 66 feeling like it represented an era of travel (or of life) that was easy and carefree and superior to life today. Visiting the small museums and old business establishments along the corridor, she has seen the road represented in many ways. While it is often linked with elements of the past that most Americans feel a fondness for, such as the dramatic automobile designs of the 1950s and '60s, it is also often represented in ways that reveal the darker side of travel in previous generations. For example, several museums and businesses along Route 66 feature salvaged Burma Shave advertising signs, which formerly lined the road in sets of three or four, offering highway wisdom to tourists one line at a time. Many of these signs are rather ominous in tone. One set, featured at a shop and visitors' center in Hackberry, Arizona, reads, "Big Mistake," "Many Make," "Rely on Horn," "Instead of Brake." Another set, featured at a tiny museum in McLean, Texas, reads "Hardly a Driver," "Is Still Alive," "Who Passed on Curves," "At Seventy-Five." These signs speak not of the joy and freedom involved in driving Route 66 when it was a commissioned highway, but of the dangers inherent in barreling down a two-lane road at 70 miles an hour in a car with none of the safety features we take for granted today.

Additionally, the first author has noticed in her own Route 66 travels that for every large display of James-Dean-style mannequins posing with red '57 Chevy convertibles or settling in on chromed swivel-stools behind diner-style lunch counters to inevitably order the Blue Plate Special, there seems to be a community scrapbook or a barbershop wall papered with letters and clippings that tell the story of Route 66 through a mosaic of accounts written by people who have lived along it, worked along it, traveled it, or simply cared about it. The Devil's Rope & Route 66 Museum in McLean Texas, for example, features such a scrapbook. When she last stopped there, it was open randomly to a memoir that had been submitted by a man who had worked in a local garage, servicing the automobiles of Route 66 tourists. He noted that most of his customers were friendly, but that some could never be satisfied, and told the story of a (seemingly) "nice Christian school-teacher" whose car he repaired, who refused to pay for the service because she insisted that he had not adequately washed the outside of her car after repairing it. Similarly, when the first author last stopped at Angel Delgadillo's barbershop, in Seligman, Arizona, a Mecca for many Route 66 aficionados because of Angel's seminal role in the preservation of Route 66 and his large collection of Route 66 news clippings and memorabilia, she spent a bit of time reading some of the personal memories he had recorded. She encountered one poignant entry about how, as children, Delgadillo and his friends would make fun of the "Oakies," farm families displaced by the Dustbowl, as they came by in their rickety vehicles with mattresses strapped to the roof, and how he later came to realize how cruel this behavior was when he became old enough to understand the gravity of their situation. To read memoirs such as these is to connect with brief moments in Route 66 history through the specific perspectives of people who experienced these moments directly. Together the memoirs create a patchwork that is threaded with the challenges, accomplishments, and failures that characterized Route 66, travel, and life in mid-twentieth century America, as perceived by particular individuals. How this patchwork is read and interpreted depends greatly on the one who is doing the reading; however, a reader's attention would have to be *extremely* selective to notice only the positive aspects of life along Route 66 mentioned in these collections of memoirs, as nostalgia theory would propose (Hewison 1987).

All in all, then, it does not seem surprising that neither the authors, nor any of the participants, came away from their Route 66 travels with a thoroughly glowing, uncritical view of the past. By reading and observing information provided at stops along the corridor; by experiencing directly the heat,

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the wind, the motion of their vehicles, and the vastness of the road; by meeting people who made a living from the road because they took risks and worked hard and were lucky; and by using their imaginations to bring these elements together with their knowledge of technology and social structures in earlier decades, they each gained insight into life along Route 66 that went far beyond an appreciation for Chevy convertibles and sock-hops and that did not result in a judgment of life 50 years ago as being better or easier or more desirable than life today. Such findings echo the work of Prentice and colleagues (Beeho and Prentice 1995, 1997; McIntosh and Prentice 1999; Prentice, Witt, and Hamer 1998), who noted that tourists did not leave heritage sites with a romanticized view of the past, but rather, often recognized the hardships encountered by individuals living in previous eras.

"It Was the Change of My Life": Embracing Challenge and Personal Growth

Participants felt that their Route 66 travels had challenged them to move beyond their ordinary life experiences and reflect on a variety of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and societal issues. They shared various stories of personal growth achieved during their Route 66 travels.

For the Europeans, traveling Route 66 was liberating, in that it provided an opportunity to interact with people from other social backgrounds in a setting that deemphasized income and status. At the outset of the trip, their interactions felt awkward, but ultimately, they were able to transcend their normal expectations and form diverse new friendships. They also felt that the tour had been an exercise in teamwork; learning to ride in formation and read and respond to each other's movements was literally essential for survival. The European participants also noted that touring Route 66 by motorcycle had been a significant challenge for several of their travel companions, especially those who were not accustomed to intense physical activity and spending time outdoors. Riding a motorcycle for several hours a day, several days in a row, in the wind and the sun and the rain, was difficult and tiring, but in the end it left them with a powerful sense of pride and accomplishment at having exceeded the expectations of others and fulfilled a personal goal. The American participants noted that their relationships with their traveling companions had grown as a result of their Route 66 trips. They discovered that they enjoyed the experience of being alone with their family members for long periods of time and that they felt closer to their families at the trip's conclusion. Additionally, they reported that they had grown from conversations they'd had with people they'd met along Route 66, which had led them to reflect on their lives.

Experiences of challenge, reflection, and personal growth at a heritage site are clearly at odds with the nostalgia critique's view of heritage tourism as a yearning for escape in a simplified, glorified version of the past—as a quest for comfort in the familiar and the pleasurable (Dann 1994; Hewison 1987). Similarly, the emphasis placed by participants on novelty and serendipity conflicts with the nostalgia critique's assessment of the desires of heritage tourists. According to the nostalgia critique, a visit to a heritage site would be exclusively easy, comfortable, and pleasurable. It would confirm "the expected and cognitively familiar" for its visitors (Graburn 1983, p. 20). It would not encourage visitors to stretch beyond their comfort zones, to engage in serious contemplation, or to question their priorities. Visitors would leave with essentially the same understandings with which they had entered, and such understandings would have, in fact, been strengthened by the visit. For these participants, this was not the case.

"Taking the Trip is My Story": Tourists as Active Constructors of Experience

The final insight gained in this study challenges the assumption of the nostalgia critique that heritage tourists are passive recipients of information that has been shaped by site managers, who have no goal other than to provide tourists with "what they want to see" (Dann 1996, p. 220). Based on the experiences of both authors, this assumption felt intuitively wrong at the outset of this project, and indeed it does not seem to explain the experiences of the participants. Conversely, the recollections of Route 66 travels they shared reveal them to have been highly active participants, who reflected upon what they read, heard, and experienced and integrated the knowledge they gained with their own life experiences. This was first perceived when the participants discussed the ways they had gained historical insight from their trips. As noted previously, not only did they mention historical information they had gained by reading books and displays at sites along the corridor, but they also discussed the ways the information had come alive for them as they drove the road and experienced the landscape and the elements. They actively integrated the formal information they had received with their own firsthand experiences of the corridor and thought they had come away from the trip with increased historical insight. In short, they were active constructors of their own learning experiences.

That personal growth was an outcome of traveling Route 66 also reveals the participants' active involvement in creating the experience. For some of them, making the trip became part of their identities because it represented a challenge they had mastered or because it had been a major turning point in their lives. For others, the trip was a way to share a part of their identity. For example, Liv, a Norwegian woman who had spent the first 14 years of her life in America, said:

> For most of [the participants], it's their first time coming to America. I think the best part is that I feel that sometimes they get to be my friends, and I'm showing them my country. And this is really showing them what the United States is. It's not just the really big cities and the fuss and everything and the people who are not interested in meeting you. It is this stretch that is extremely interesting, and the people are interesting, and I'm showing them my country.

Ultimately, it was Baer N. who best expressed the sense of ownership the tourists seemed to have over their experiences when he said, "It becomes personal. Yes, Route 66 has a good history. That's the story of Route 66, but taking the trip is my story. I did it."

In addition to conceptualizing tourists as passive, mindless consumers of heritage sites, the nostalgia critique also

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views heritage providers as predominantly reactive, their primary interest being to provide tourists with what they want to see (Dann 1996). While it was beyond the scope of this study to conduct formal interviews with Route 66 heritage providers to explore the validity of this contention, observations made during the first author's travels along Route 66, along with the observations of the participants, contradict such a notion. Instead, tourism service providers on Route 66 seem to be very *proactive*, and what they do seems to be very personally meaningful. For the service providers, introducing tourists to Route 66 and taking care of them seems to be a way of maintaining a family tradition, sharing an aspect of their history and identity with interested strangers, or seizing an opportunity to connect with new people. For instance, the first author recalls one conversation she had with a motel operator on Route 66 in Arizona, who told her that his motel, a famous Route 66 landmark, had been built by his parents, and he had been raised in it. He and his siblings grew up and moved away, and eventually his parents passed away, and their motel fell into disuse and disrepair. When he returned to visit it and saw the state it was in, he and his siblings decided to renovate it and operate it as a tribute to their parents' hard work and sacrifice. His reception desk features a scrapbook of the motel's history, which includes old family photos, recent clippings from the publicity it has received since it reopened, and letters from people from all over the world who have stayed there, and, if given the opportunity, he will talk for hours with guests about his personal experiences and about what Route 66 means to him. Study participants reported similar experiences with local people. Liv offered her impression of them: "They're proud of Route 66. They were kind of thrilled that a bunch of Norwegians were interested in it and wanted to show us and share it with us." The experiences of Route 66's service providers may thus constitute fertile ground for further examinations of the meaning of the heritage tourism process that extend beyond the nostalgia paradigm.

CONCLUSION

Through exploration of the narratives of nine Route 66 tourists, this study suggests that the visitor experience at this heritage site is complex and multifaceted. It is comprised of many elements, including gaining historical insight; partaking in a particular type of driving experience; visiting unique attractions deemed to be entertaining, noncommoditized, and "nongeneric"; interacting with fellow travelers and with local individuals encountered along the road; and experiencing an "odyssey" of adventure, challenge, reflection, and personal growth. These complex experiences are not sufficiently explained by the rather narrow conceptualization of heritage tourism experiences articulated by nostalgia theory, one of the reigning theories in the realm of popular culture heritage tourism literature. Therefore, while we are not arguing that nostalgia theory is never useful for explaining *any* tourist's experience at *any* heritage site, we suspect that it may not be the most robust explanation, given its conceptual problems, and given that it failed to account for the experiences of each of the participants we interviewed at a heritage site to which it is typically assumed to apply quite well.

It is important to note, however, that this study is limited in several ways. One limitation involves the fact that interviews were conducted with participants whose purpose for the trip was specifically to travel Route 66 and who traveled it in its entirety; many Route 66 visitors travel only portions of the corridor as side trips. For this reason, the findings can only be contextualized within the realm of participants whose visits fit this pattern, rather than among those who choose to visit portions of Route 66 as parts of trips that have other primary purposes. Another limitation involves the fact that this study specifically focused on individuals with strong feelings about Route 66. The viewpoints of such individuals constituted a valuable starting place because the intensity of their feelings about the corridor permitted full and rich discussions about the meaning of their experiences along it; however, their views may not mirror those of others who visit the Route more casually.

It is important to reiterate that the narrow focus of the present study was intended to provide initial grounds for exploring heritage tourism experiences and their meaning to participants. What it reveals is that a need exists for new and more complex ways of conceptualizing heritage tourism experiences and their meaning to a variety of site visitors. For the participants in this study, heritage tourism was very much an embodied experience. Participants did not merely gaze at historic sites and gain information from interpretive displays; rather, they interacted with history through vivid visceral experiences that directly engaged their bodies and senses (e.g., driving/riding, consuming food). They also experienced profound social interactions through their travels. In turn, these experiences became the raw material from which individual participants forged personal narratives of the journey. They became the structure on which the participants hung their interpretations about what the trip had meant to them and the role it had played in their personal development. Thus, the experience was about connecting with history, not by romanticizing the past as a lost golden era, but by choosing to participate in an ongoing, dynamic cultural legacy, which is rooted in the past but continues to spur new encounters that become part of the participants' biographies in the present. In this case, heritage tourism, often portrayed as a past-oriented endeavor, provided the raw material for active self-making, a future-oriented pursuit.

While nostalgia theory did not encapsulate the experiences of the participants in this study, several other extant theoretical frameworks seem to hold much promise in this regard. First, the work of Crang (1996), who analyzed the phenomenon of historical reenactment, is highly valuable, because it goes beyond typical discussions of heritage *sites* to instead emphasize embodied heritage *practices.* His work calls attention to interactions with heritage spaces and concepts as potential performances of self-knowing, which involve the body and emotions, as well as cognition. Although, unlike the individuals Crang observed, the participants in this study were not attempting to recreate an experience of the past, they were engaging heritage and place in an embodied and emotional way, and this process resulted in perceptions of self-development.

Second, Noy's (2004) work on backpacker's narratives of self-change is instructive, as it emphasizes adventure in tourism as being not an end in itself, but rather, a springboard for tourists' identity construction through the stories of adventure they share with others. Noy argues that although backpacking may be a particularly conducive form of travel for the production of adventure and its subsequent

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narration, this process may be mirrored to a lesser degree in other forms of tourism. Route 66 would seem to constitute a clear example of how such processes can occur in a heritage tourism setting. Noy's work thus provides a useful way of conceptualizing the relationship between the experiences of adventure and risk reported by the participants in this study and their perceptions of personal growth, a relationship that should be further explored in the heritage tourism context.

Third, Wang's (1999) work on authenticity should be considered. In this seminal piece, Wang proposed the concept of existential authenticity, a state of being in which tourists feel more in touch with their "real selves" than they feel during ordinary, everyday activities. He argued that tourism is a form of escape from and/or resistance to individuals' perceived oppression by particular conditions of modernity. The instrumentalization and commodification of human relationships characteristic of the capitalist mode of production, the splitting and mediation of the self necessary for participation in formally rationalized organizations that characterize modern life, and the separation of humans from nature embodied in the modern industrialized condition all lead humans to feel alienated from the selves they would be without the constraints and redefinitions imposed on their lives by these systems. The liminal nature of tourism activates, in some tourists, the feeling of escaping or overcoming those constraints and feeling in touch with their whole, unified selves, with their fellow humans, and with nature. Many of the celebrated episodes described by participants, such as becoming fully absorbed in sensory experiences while touring, interacting with local people and places in ways that defied the norms of the prevailing consumer culture in which tourism encounters are typically situated, and bonding with fellow tourists through the unusual conditions imposed by the trip, seem to resonate strongly with Wang's (1999) notion of existential authenticity. Future work on heritage tourism should thus pursue better understandings of the relationship between heritage sites/practices, lived experiences, and identity development. Scholars should seek to expand the connections between theoretical frameworks such as those mentioned above and the experience of heritage tourism, through explorations that include more diverse types of tourists and consider a greater variety of heritage sites.

Finally, this study was also undertaken in the hope that it would produce insights of practical value for those who are active in the preservation and management of Route 66. In the tradition of applied place attachment research (Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, and Watson 1992), a better understanding of visitors' Route 66 experiences could help agencies and planners to more fully realize the noneconomic value that is encoded in the structures, landscapes, and pavement that comprise Route 66, as well as to offer some concrete suggestions for the corridor's preservation and management. It is important to note, however, that these suggestions are based only on visitors' site meanings, and not on the meanings Route 66 may hold for those who live(d) and work(ed) along it or who have other personal connections with it. Thus, we do not suggest that they should be implemented directly, but rather taken into consideration as part of a larger planning process. First, significant sections of the road should be kept open to motorized traffic, as the actual act of driving on the road seems to constitute a key element of the experience. Route 66 managers often debate this point, as many sections of the road are rapidly deteriorating, and more of the old pavement could be preserved if these sections were converted to biking/hiking paths. The centrality of actually driving the road to Route 66 tourists' experiences, however, implies that a more appropriate solution might be to remove samples of original/early pavement when sections of the road become impassable and preserve them in museums while repaving the roadbed to keep it in a usable condition. Second, while some attractions along the Route, such as the Big Texan Steak Ranch, will likely remain profitable (and, hence, remain open), other businesses, which do not share the Big Texan's advantage of being located in a populous area, may not be able to generate enough sales revenue to support themselves over the long run. As their owners reach retirement or become unable to continue to operate them, such businesses are often closed or abandoned (Wallis 2001). Given that visiting these historic businesses is an integral part of the experience of the corridor, keeping them open is a more desirable option than merely preserving them as nonoperating historic structures. Finally, if Dedek's (2002) assessment of Route 66 promotional materials as primarily relying on nostalgia is accurate, then perhaps promotional strategies that more accurately reflect the meanings of Route 66 would be more effective. Perhaps focusing on the types of knowledge one can gain while traveling Route 66, the unique type of driving experience it offers, and the interesting attractions and people located along it could better illustrate to potential visitors the various possibilities for meaningful experiences that are available along the corridor.

Above all, this paper has attempted to demonstrate that tourists' own readings of heritage sites do not necessarily match scholars' interpretations of them, and that this situation has implications for both theory building and heritage site management. It is hoped that this idea will stimulate further research on tourists' perceptions of their experiences at heritage sites, so that this dimension can be more fully incorporated into theory generation and site management in the future.

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NOTE

1. The Hell's Angels are a notorious American motorcycle club, dating from the 1960s, which has come to be associated with various illegal activities in the popular imagination.

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