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The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum Announces *Route 66: From Trails to Truck Stops*, a New Exhibition Opening February 2026 for the Centennial of America's Most Beloved Highway

OKLAHOMA CITY, October 13, 2025 — Dusty trails, gleaming chrome, neon motel signs and the hum of the open highway — all roads lead to *Route 66: From Trails to Truck Stops*, a new exhibition opening Feb. 6, 2026, at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum that runs through May 4, 2026. Timed to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the iconic “Mother Road,” the exhibition explores the history and romance of Route 66 and its enduring ties to the American West.

“At its core, the story of the West is one of movement: people, cultures and communities forging new lives across vast landscapes,” said David Davis, Chief Curatorial Officer at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. “Westward expansion was primarily driven by the need to move people and goods, and the paths carved across the frontier shaped settlement, commerce and identity. From Native trade routes to wagon trails, riverboats, railroads, automobiles and 18-wheelers, each left its mark on the American story.”

The exhibition will showcase artifacts, photographs, maps and multimedia experiences that reveal how the routes of the past evolved into a cultural phenomenon.

Route 66: From Trails to Truck Stops explores three major themes:

- The Ways West — Early Native American trade routes, migrant trails, railroads and early road systems that laid the groundwork for America’s transportation network.
- The Mother Road — The origins, history and golden era of Route 66, including its role during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression and its rise as a symbol of American freedom and adventure.

- **Roadside Attractions** — The explosion of roadside tourism and Western iconography along Route 66, from diners and motels to the birth of the Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1955.

“There is no better place to celebrate the centennial of Route 66 than right here in Oklahoma, where the highway stretches across more miles than any other state,” said Lt. Governor Matt Pinnell. “From Tulsa to Oklahoma City to small towns along the way, Route 66 has always been part of our identity and economy. The Cowboy’s new exhibition will be a centerpiece of the 2026 centennial celebrations taking place throughout Oklahoma. As we welcome visitors from across the world in 2026, Oklahoma will once again be at the heart of America’s greatest road trip.”

Legacy of the Mother Road

Named in 1926, Route 66 stitched together existing roads into a lifeline from Chicago to Los Angeles. It carried families fleeing drought and depression, tourists drawn to neon and novelty, and dreamers chasing the horizon. John Steinbeck gave it an enduring name — the “Mother Road” — in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

“For nearly 60 years, Route 66 tied East to West until its decommissioning in 1985, but by then it had become much more than pavement,” said Davis. “It came to signify freedom, adventure and the American spirit — especially the untamed spirit of the West. Fittingly, the Cowboy Hall of Fame, as the Museum was originally known, was planted directly on the Mother Road in 1955.

Though no longer an official highway, Route 66’s spirit still runs strong. The 2026 centennial will celebrate how a road that became a legend, inspired generations and continues to carry the romance of the West worldwide.

“The Route 66 centennial is as much about the future as it is the past,” said Kerry Barrick, Route 66 Coordinator with the Oklahoma Department of Commerce. “Communities are using this moment to invest in tourism, revitalize main streets and share Oklahoma’s story with a new generation of travelers. The Cowboy’s exhibition will showcase the cultural heartbeat behind those efforts, connecting the highway’s history to the opportunities it continues to create for our state.”

The Museum’s Connection to Route 66

Route 66 isn’t just part of the Museum’s story — it’s the reason the Museum is located in Oklahoma City. More than 70 years ago, when cities across the country competed to host a new institution honoring the legends and landscapes of the American West, Oklahoma City’s bid succeeded through equal parts determination and geography.

The site chosen was Persimmon Hill in northeast Oklahoma City, perched directly on Route 66. High traffic counts made it a natural destination, and the city strengthened its case by donating the property. From the start, the Cowboy Hall of Fame was placed on Route 66 not only as a

convenient stop for travelers, but as a lasting symbol of the freedom and adventure the Mother Road represented.

For more information, visit nationalcowboymuseum.org.

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About the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum

The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City is America's premier institution of Western history, art and culture. Founded in 1955, the Museum preserves and interprets the evolving history and cultures of the American West and shares that story with millions worldwide. Its internationally renowned collection of Western art and artifacts is complemented by dynamic educational programs that celebrate the enduring legacy of the West.

A recent RegionTrack economic impact study projects the Museum will contribute \$313 million to Oklahoma's economy through 2028, including \$170 million in direct impact and \$143 million in ripple effects, affirming its role as both a cultural cornerstone and a vital economic engine.

For more information, visit nationalcowboymuseum.org.