Trip through the past

For anyone who’s ever heard the call of the open road and been overcome by an urge to motor west on the most famous highway in the country, Peter Dedek can sympathize.

Dedek has cruised the “Mother Road” through America’s heartland, shooting the breeze outside rural gas stations and fueling himself at greasy spoons little changed since the highway’s heyday, all in an effort to understand why Route 66 has become such an influential touchstone in American culture. The result is *Hip to the Trip: A Cultural History of Route 66* [University of New Mexico Press], a book that delves into the unique character of the highway.

“The thing I learned was that Route 66 really is a community,” said Dedek, assistant professor of interior design in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences. “Coming from an academic point of view, I was perfectly willing to debunk that, but I couldn’t. It turned out to be true.

“My then-girlfriend and I took a long trip, and we interviewed people up and down that road. They’d say, ‘Oh! You’ve got to talk to Shea. He’s about 200 miles down. He owns a gas station in Illinois...’ We kept getting referred down the road to different people, so there really was this sense that there’s just this one single community,” he said. “It is a lot like driving through the past. There was one point where we left Route 66 in Arizona and went to this place called Bullhead City. Everything there had been built within the last 10 years, and there were crowds of people and lots of traffic. We were driving an old 1976 GMC with an RV on the back, so it felt weird, all of a sudden being back in the modern world after three weeks on Route 66.”
Like Route 66 itself, which winds its way through the countryside, Dedek came to write his first book via a circuitous route. When working on his doctorate in historical preservation, he’d originally planned to write his dissertation on the evolution of the motel. That is, until he came across Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945 by James Belasco, a book that covered the same ground he’d planned to explore. Quickly shifting gears, Dedek redirected his focus to the Dixie Highway in Tennessee, but abandoned those plans when it became clear that the Dixie Highway lacked a well-defined cultural aura – unlike the famed Route 66.

“That’s what got my interest: Why is Route 66 famous? That was really the first question I asked,” Dedek said. “Why

Route 66? Why is it not Route 30 – the Lincoln Highway – that is famous? Why not the Dixie Highway? What is it about this highway? That’s part of what the book attempts to answer.”

Spending so much time on the road, Dedek got to know it better than many people who have traveled it over the years. After putting countless miles on his odometer, he’s even developed affection for certain sections of the highway – New Mexico, in particular, is a favorite. The environment and communities Route 66 passes through simply have a more rustic atmosphere, Dedek says, almost as if the highway is a time machine taking drivers back to 1935. Even the sections of Albuquerque that Route 66 passes through have a quaint, old-fashioned feel. Every section of the highway has something that makes it memorable, however. The people in particular, says Dedek, are what make Route 66 such a singular experience.

“We interviewed a guy named Ernie – he must be in his 90s by now – who talked about his experience of running the Pig Hip Diner in ‘35 in Illinois,” Dedek says. “He told us about working during the Depression, what the customers were like. He said that there weren’t just Okies going west – there were actually a lot of Mexicans going north for jobs and some other people too, so it was people going every which way.

“He gave us a tour of the diner, too. Now it’s become a museum. That was a cool experience,” he says. “Talking with people who had spent so much time on this road was fascinating. The people were really the most interesting part of the research.”

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Route 66 opened in 1926 and quickly became the major corridor between Chicago and Los Angeles. Arcing 2,400 miles through eight states, it replaced the railroad as the transportation of choice for tourists since the 1880s – before the interstate highway system replaced it at least a decade before its official demise in 1985.

The celebrated two-lane took travelers from the urban bustle of the Windy City through the prairies of southern Illinois, the gentle Ozarks of Missouri, farmlands of eastern Oklahoma and the oilfields of the Texas Panhandle, past Indian ruins in New Mexico and the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and across Death Valley before rewarding them with the beaches of southern California.

In its heyday, 1926 to 1956, the highway was associated with the Wild West cowboys and Indians and Dust Bowl Okies. In more recent years, it has come to nostalgically represent “individualism, innocence, self-realization, patriotism, coming-of-age and the freedom of the open road,” Peter Dedek writes in his book Hip to the Trip. It’s a symbol of the way America used to be, with “tourist courts,” full-service filling stations, curio shops and mom-and-pop cafes. Today, travelers often take it to “experience its eerie, vacant quality,” Dedek writes.