

**Laurel Kane – Afton, Oklahoma**  
Transcribed by Cynthia Martin

Background – childhood, father’s interest in road travel – collection of roadside postcards – decision to leave suburban Connecticut and move to Oklahoma – how they found the place in Afton, an old gas station from the 1930s – divorce – birthplace – why Afton? – rehabilitation of building – gross receipts – community support, or lack thereof – other businesses in Afton – types of visitors – obstacles – advantages of being a Route 66 town – traveling Route 66 as a child – support of other Route 66 enthusiasts/organizations – running the business – interest in Route 66 as a child – names of other Route 66 revivalists – surge of public interest in Route 66 – “just hang in there” – finding the postcards – possible Route 66 festival plans

INTERVIEW BETWEEN DAVID K. DUNAWAY AND LAUREL KANE

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DAVID: Well, what brings a lady from Connecticut all the way to Afton, Oklahoma?

LAUREL: Well, I have been a Route 66—fill in the blank—fanatic, historian, researcher, whatever you want to call it, seriously for thirty or forty years. Prior to that, as a kid—and you’re going to hear this a lot, and I’m sure you have in the past—traveling with my parents.

My dad was a big-time traveler, he just loved it. He was a roadie. My mother—pretty much, she went along with the deal. But they dragged me out of school, and we’d go road-tripping. Because my dad was so into it, I got into it. And we were like two kids on a road trip, stopping at every tourist trap and picking up rocks along the side of the road and filling the trunk with rocks, etcetera. Anyway, so I grew up, and got married to a man who is into antique cars. So this is a perfect match, or it was for awhile. And we did some road-tripping too, so I continued my interest.

And I am also a collector of roadside postcards. And a large part of that collection is Route 66-related. Probably about 5000 of them are Route 66 postcards, and 15,000 altogether. These are, you know, estimates.

So at the time, we lived a lot of places, but ten years ago, eleven years ago we were living right outside of New York City, in a Connecticut suburb. And we lived there for thirty years and we were a little . . . we wanted out. Not so much into the suburban living situation. But we did for our daughter . . . and so we popped in one of the cars, which was a 1957 Packard Hawk, and decided we were going to start at the Atlantic Ocean and end at the Pacific Ocean without ever getting on an Interstate, and while we were on the Route 66 part of the trip, we were going to just sort of look around for someplace that we might want to relocate to that had a large enough building for my stuff, his cars, and all of this. So, that’s what we did, and when we approached Tulsa on this trip, I told my husband that I had been in communication with a man in Tulsa for quite a long time because we both worked for the Old Prodigy online network in the “antiques and collectables” area. So we talked on the internet. And I said “As long as we’re driving through Tulsa, let’s stop and meet Ron McCoy. So we did, and got along great. And my husband said, “We’re looking for a place on Route 66,” and all that, and he also mentioned that we wanted to build a house on a lake, or on some water. So Ron said, “Got the perfect thing for you. There’s Grand Lake here, it’s the largest lake in Oklahoma, and Route 66 runs past it. So we drove up there, and there in Afton was this

building that we thought would be large enough. It's an old gas station from 1930. So we bought it. (Laughs.)

DAVID: Just like that?

LAUREL: I think it was on the second trip, if I . . . No, well no. Yes we made an offer right away. Yeah, we got it. But then it was a year or more's worth of continuous trips back and forth with the car trailer bringing the antique cars down. And I can't say for sure that was the end of our marriage, but we did get divorced minutes before we moved here. (Laughs)

I mean I'm in the truck pulling a car on one of our trips down here, he said he was out of here. Goodbye. And all of my friends said, "Oh, don't go, stay here in Connecticut." And I said "Nope, nope, nope, I'm fulfilling my dream, this is what I'm gonna do."

Oops! (Problems with the tape recorder/microphone.)

DAVID: (Undecipherable.) Just a moment here.

LAUREL: It's probably trying to tell me I should shut up.

DAVID: That should work just fine.

LAUREL: All right. I'll try not to move too much. I mean, c'mon, this is the best part of the story! OK, so, I didn't want to not come here. And he didn't want to not come here. So we both came here, and as it turns out, still friends, good friends, and we own the place together. And he lives up there. I live down here in Tulsa. But he lives up there. But he now has a new young wife and a baby and all that stuff, so he doesn't spend quite as much time there as I do. But we are both completely involved in it, and it seems to be working out just fine. So that's how we got here (there).

DAVID: I'm going to take you back a little more, into your own background, and ask where and when you were born.

LAUREL: I was born in 1946 in Cleveland, Ohio. And lived in that area until I was twelve, and then the family moved to Kentucky—Lexington, Kentucky. Lived there, and then I went to the University of Kentucky and graduated from there. And got married and then we lived something like seventeen places before we finally ended up here.

DAVID: Now, why Afton?

LAUREL: Because it was there. Really, seriously it could have been anyplace. It could have been California, wherever we found a place. But I don't know, the planets aligned on top of Afton, and there we were.

DAVID: Well, there's certainly other lakes along Route 66.

LAUREL: No, I honestly think it is because of my friend Ron in Tulsa. Who, incidentally, ends up being my very very best friend, now. I lived up near Afton for a couple years when I first moved here, right across the street from my ex-husband and his family. And that was not a good idea. So I moved to Tulsa because of Ron. And now he drives, he goes up with me to Afton almost every time. He's my best volunteer, and . . .

DAVID: And is mentioned prominently in your blog.

LAUREL: Oh, you read the blog!

DAVID: Well . . .

LAUREL: (Laughs.) Why am I telling you any of this, then?

DAVID: It's for "posteriority."

LAUREL: (Laughs.) "Posteriority?"

DAVID: Now you rehabilitated the station up there. Could you tell me a little about that activity, when it started, and . . .

LAUREL: When we moved into that place it was an unbelievable, godawful mess. The previous owner had done no maintenance on it ever, and it hadn't been a gas station since the 80s, early 80s. And after that time it was a hair salon, and a western auto store, and this and that. And all the electric was not only outdated but in big globs all over the place. It was lookin' to burn down. I think we saved it just before it burned down. Absolutely everything needed to be done. But we didn't want to do this fancy restoration, after all it's a gas station! So we took down the false ceiling, and there was a beautiful tin ceiling above. So we rehabilitated that. And there was carpet glued to all the floors, so we got all that off and did some tile work on the floors. Just everything. The walls, we put up wainscoting around the walls, put in new heating and new ventilation, and . . .

DAVID: How long did this take?

LAUREL: My husband was a heating and ventilation engineer so he could—this was easy. I was trying to think of the exact date because I knew you would ask. I think it was in 2001 we started the rehab, but we didn't really open for a couple years after that

because it was just . . . I mean it was open. If anybody stopped by they could come in and look, but we didn't officially open until about 2005, I think.

DAVID: You did this all with your own funds?

LAUREL: Yes. He took an early retirement so we could do it, and fortunately he came up with some lovely patents prior, that, you know, made us financially able to do it. And we're still losing money hand over fist on a daily basis there. But we knew that it was never going to be a money-maker, we knew it was going to be, you know, a hole to throw money into. Which we do. And I sell a few things on my side. Oh! you know, like in January I sold \$4 worth of things, but it got real good in February, I sold \$42 worth of things. I mean that's the way it is, although in the summer it's a different story. Might sell almost \$1000 a month, but that's, you know, gross.

DAVID: Gross.

LAUREL: You know. (Laughs.) So, really. And the guidebooks . . . I only sell things that were created on Route 66 or by Route 66 people. So all the books were written by Route 66 people or friends of mine, all the items . . . nothing imported or anything, all made on Route 66, and where some of the money can go back to Route 66. So, that's a recipe for never making any money. But we're used to it. (Laughs.)

DAVID: And it always takes you a while to get established. Now, did you receive much community support when you came into there?

LAUREL: Who have you been talking to? (Laughs.) No. Zeeee-ro community support. Zero. Up until about a month ago.

The mayor decided to come and visit me after I've had the building for ten or eleven years. And the reason for that is two women from Northeastern Oklahoma University had received a grant to find a small town and try to do some economic feasibility studies on it and figure out what could be done. And they came to town, and since I'm the only feasible place in town, they got me together with a meeting with the mayor, and it turns out he's been in office forever and ever. And he's tired of it. And he's really done not a lot. But I think he's just not into it. But he kind of got into it during this meeting because we were—my ex-husband was there, he was really throwing out some good ideas—and the mayor was getting kind of interested. Well, there's nobody really to be interested in me in town. There's no Chamber of Commerce, nothing like that. There was a guy who came to this meeting that was entitled the "Economic Development" guy from town. He was really interested in something, too. So we're just starting maybe a little plan to maybe get people into town.

For example, on old Route 66 and on the Interstate there are a zillion empty billboards. And we're thinking that might be possible to get a real cut rate on a billboard, and the town would help out, perhaps. And we'd put up a billboard directing people, not just to my place, but to Afton . . . there's hope, I guess . . .

DAVID: Well, are there many other businesses in Afton?

LAUREL: No, we were trying to make a list. Because the two women thought they might see if there was some hope for starting a Chamber of Commerce. And we only came up with about ten things on the list, and they aren't really consumer-oriented businesses. They're a plumber, and the guy who sells oil field equipment, and there's a bar down the road, but we never see anybody in it. Uh . . . no, that's about it.

DAVID: And so I would think you would stand out in Afton.

LAUREL: Yeah, because we're the only building that has paint on it in the whole town. We do stand out. But even so, I don't think we stand out enough. Because when people come into a town like Afton, they just race through it because they're not expecting to see anything. Now I've got my open flags out and my Route 66 shield, and anything else I can . . . And we've got a nice paint job and a lovely modified tile orange roof, you know. So . . . and two beautiful old pumps out in front. But somebody who is just passing through, they're just passing through. So, most of my visitors are people who have found me in a guidebook or in a video, or a newspaper article, or something like that.

I was trying to figure it out, because I thought you might ask, and the best I have it figured out, about a third of our visitors are from other countries, another third are from all over this country, and the last third or maybe slightly less than a third would be more local people from this side of Oklahoma, and maybe a little of Arkansas, and that sort of thing.

DAVID: What do they usually want? Do they have different wants, these three groups?

LAUREL: No. I wouldn't say their wants can be grouped geographically. I'm more likely to say their wants are grouped by "Route 66 people" versus "car people." The Route 66 people are very very interested in what I have to say, and my guidebooks and my guidance, and all, and what I can tell them about the various places around. But then there are the car people who couldn't care less: they just want to see the cars. And probably more of the local people are the car people. The foreign people are definitely there to know about Route 66, so they pay a lot of attention to that.

DAVID: What kind of visitors do you get from overseas? What nationalities, for example?

LAUREL: Number one, Australia. Lots of Australians, and New Zealanders. Norwegians, all the Scandinavian countries. Um . . . after that I would say the Netherlands, and then Italy, France, Spain . . . Oh! Germans! I forgot the Germans, yeah. And, the rest, I mean have had visitors from forty or some countries, but the rest are spotty here and there. Very very few from South American, quite a few Canadians and British. Oh, and Yugoslavians come in big groups. Little of this, little of that. Not as many Asians as I had expected. And definitely not very many South Americans.

DAVID: Now, are they there to buy curios? Are they there to pick your brains? What?

LAUREL: Well, a little of both. The brain-picking . . . I don't speak enough foreign languages, and those who don't speak English, we have a little trouble with communication. But yes, if we can communicate, they do want to pick my brain. And if they come in big groups there's not quite as much brain-pickin' done, because they're kind of hustled along. So they come in and I give them my one-minute-twenty-five-cent speech, you know . . . And then they want to go back and look at the cars and then they're out of there. The people who are traveling individually or in small, like two-by-two, or whatever, will stay quite awhile.

Today I had some people from Great Britain that stayed for a long time and were very very interested in everything that was going on, on Route 66, from what they said I know they had stopped at every one of the places . . . They'd started in Chicago and it had taken them a week to get to me, and that's a pretty long time. And they did, they knew everything. They knew as much as I knew about a lot of the things between me and Chicago. So they were really doin' their homework. Others not so much, you know. It's really hard to categorize that way.

DAVID: Do you sell, like, soda pop and snacks and things?

LAUREL: Well, I have soda pop. And it is in a little refrigerator, and if they're thirsty, just . . . there's a sign on the refrigerator that says "Soda Pop \$1" but I never charge 'em. I mean, I can't do that. Um, snacks, we have this really really nice popcorn machine, but I keep forgetting to make popcorn. But when my friend Ron is with me he'll make popcorn and we'll just give away free popcorn.

DAVID: Has the mix of travelers you just described changed over the years?

LAUREL: A lot more people from other countries.

DAVID: Than when you started?

LAUREL: Yes. But that may just be me. I can't say that that's true for all of Route 66. Because I am a relatively new business there, and I'm relatively new in the guidebooks and all the publicity and everything. When I first came I wasn't in anything that they read, so what do they know? It's always kind of exciting to see my place mentioned in a French guidebook or a Czechoslovakian guidebook or something like that. That means tourists will show up.

DAVID: So there are more foreign tourists. Have the American tourists changed? Are they the same?

LAUREL: Getting a little younger. I really think they are. When I first started out, people were old like me. Now, well, let's talk about today, just taking a typical day. Although I wasn't there as I came home early for this. When I left today we'd had about fifteen visitors, and about, well . . . we had about three, I can't quite remember . . . three, three couples from different countries. . . and . . . yeah I don't think any older people were there today. Older, let's say, than me. They were, probably the oldest there were a couple who came in that were in their 60s. But otherwise they were fairly young. One couple came in that was on their pre-marriage honeymoon, doing Route 66, headed out to Las Vegas to be married by an Elvis impersonator. Who, by the way has volunteered to come to their hotel room after the ceremony and serenade them. Um . . . you need a place like this! You hear everything. (Laughs.) They were having their honeymoon first on the way out there. So they were a young couple. You know, it's kind of fun to have that . . .

DAVID: Could you give me a sense of the obstacles you faced as you were going through this rehabilitation?

LAUREL: Well, the main obstacles were the rehabilitation itself, a huge job. Thank goodness my then-husband was good at that sort of thing, because I was at that point kind of in a fog, because I was taken aback by the divorce. So I probably didn't hold up my end of the deal as far as the rehab of the place, and he's much better at that anyway. But then as soon as it was useable, I took over and, you know, got everything arranged. My room (I wish you could come see it sometime), the room that I have, is large. It's almost as large as this room. And so I had to move in all my . . . not all my memorabilia, some of it's still in my basement and here in Tulsa in boxes. And then there was the moving of the cars. But back then I was healthy. Now I'm on kidney dialysis three days a week, so that changes everything. Back then I was there every day doing something, you know.

DAVID: Did you encounter any obstacles from the community around?

LAUREL: No. In fact, we have come to the conclusion that they have no restrictions on anything in that town. And we've built four or five outbuildings around back and nobody has ever even blinked an eye. You know, no such thing as a building permit or anything. The town is just about dead.



DAVID: Are they conscious of the advantages of being a Route 66 town?

LAUREL: No, and I think that can be found in a lot of these little towns. The people have lived there all their lives. They barely know. I can probably count, in the years that I've been there, maybe ten, fifteen people from Afton who didn't know they were living on Route 66. They come in and "Now what are you, what are you doing here?" they say, and I say "Well it's a Route 66 Visitors Center." And they say "This is Route 66?" A lot of them don't, but a lot of them do know. My best friend from Afton who comes in and hangs out with me a lot is a lady named Betty Wheatley who owned a little drive-in restaurant two miles down the road on Route 66 at a place called Buffalo Ranch—a big tourist trap sort of place. And she had that for forty-one years. And so she always thinks of me as sort of taking over her job because although we do different things, she was the one that always greeted every traveler that came down the way. And now it's me. So she loves that. She's older now, she's seventy-five or something, but she likes to hang out there because she still likes to see the people that come through. So she knows, she knows we're on Route 66, you know. And she understands the importance of it and the historical interest.

DAVID: It's kind of like you inherited her mantle of being the Route 66 person in your small town.

LAUREL: Exactly.

DAVID: I know there's still people who look for that Buffalo Ranch. I once looked for it.

LAUREL: It's now a truck stop. Now a truck stop. They still kept a herd of buffalo there, but . . . .

DAVID: Did you always think you'd make it out there?

LAUREL: Well, yes and no. (Laughs.) Depending on the definition of "making it." I knew once I was there I wasn't going to change my mind. As far as making it financially, I knew I was *not* going to make it there. My ex-husband, I was worried about him for awhile, after he found this new wife and had a family and everything, that he was going to drop out of the deal. But he's stuck with it too. If for no other reason than it's a place for him to store all his antique cars, which is advantageous for both of us. I keep saying "his" antique cars, they really belong, we never separated things like that after the divorce, they're both of ours. But, never had a moment's thought about going back home, or, to Connecticut.

DAVID: You've talked about coming to Afton and finding a place where you could live and where you could put the cars. Were you going there and making that decision on the basis of Route 66?

LAUREL: Oh yes.

DAVID: So it was Route 66 . . .

LAUREL: We absolutely wanted something on Route 66. That was the deal.

DAVID: Why?

LAUREL: And we wanted it right on Route 66 and we were very fortunate because our property ends at the curb. You know, we're on Route 66.

DAVID: Why Route 66 and not the Lincoln Highway or any of the other great roads.

LAUREL: Oh because of my collecting interests and my historical interest in Route 66. And it just built up, all my life, that that's where I wanted to be.

DAVID: Did your Dad particularly favor Route 66?

LAUREL: I can't really remember if he particularly favored it, but he, we traveled it a lot because he liked to go out west, and I remember places along Route 66. And every now and then, now this seems inconceivable to me, and probably to anybody I tell, I'll pass something, like, there used to be a sign right outside of Chelsea, Oklahoma, that said "Country Court," which recently disappeared, but I saw that on one of my trips with David, my ex-husband, in the late 90s, and immediately I remembered the sign from a trip when, you know, in the late 50s when I was a kid. Every now and then something just sticks out at me and I know—been there! You know, it was one of those "Oh, I remember that sign." And people say "But you don't really remember it." But I do. I remember it. There's another sign outside of Vinita in front of an old closed motel, and I remember it. You know. So yes, Route 66 is the only place I wanted to be.

DAVID: Have you gotten support from any other Route 66 enthusiasts or entities?

LAUREL: Well, not financial support or anything like that. But we're all friends. I'm sure you've figured that out. We all know each other, we send people to each other, you know "If you're going west, be sure to go here; if you're going east, be sure to go there." Yeah. Oh, I think the Route 66 community is very supportive. Well, we have our little struggles about certain things, but no one has ever had any struggles with me. I love 'em all, and hopefully they like me.

DAVID: How about the State Association?

LAUREL: Uh, they're supportive. They've been fine. I used to be on the Board of Directors of that, but had a little . . . my one and only altercation—in life, really, because I'm not a combative person, you know, I get away from anybody that wants that—but I had an altercation with someone on the Board and I just, on impulse, I said "I quit. I'm outta here." Never been back. But before that, I was an officer and they were a great organization. I understand the Oklahoma organization maybe is not quite as active as some of the others, but . . .

DAVID: How about the State Department of Tourism? Do they come and assist Oklahomans along Route 66?

LAUREL: I haven't seen too many indications of that. They do publish a Route 66 Guide which is very nice, and they put our individual places in it. And a lot of visitors use that and come to visit me because of that guide and that's a good thing. The State also has a TV show called *Discover Oklahoma*, and they have featured a few of us on that. They did one of the shows about my place. So yeah, they're OK. And, when I call them up and ask for 200 more guide books they come out two days later, I mean, you know—they're—but again no financial support or anything like that. But . . .

DAVID: When you were feeling, perhaps, frustrated at the pace of the renewal or the fact that the town didn't identify itself as a Route 66 town and "make hay" out of that, did you wonder if you would quit?

LAUREL: Nope.

DAVID: You knew you were there.

LAUREL: I knew I was there. But, now I hear about other people . . . I don't know if you talked to a guy named Gary Turner, or whether Michael [Wallis] told you about him or anything? He's got a little gas station on Route 66 up in Missouri, and actually it's a replica gas station, but he's an old gentleman. And his house is right up behind the gas station, and so he doesn't miss anybody. You know, if somebody slows down in front of his little station, he comes down from his house and he talks to people for hours. In fact people are always late getting to me because he keeps them there for hours and hours! But, I'm very jealous of him. I want to live closer to my station, so I could do that. As it is now, I'm only there from 9 to 3, four days a week, and from 12 to 3 one day a week, because I have to be down here in Tulsa for the dialysis Monday, Wednesday and Friday. And oh! it would be so lovely to live close to the place. But there's no way I'm living in Afton. It's a scary town after dark. It's not . . . it . . . it's not scary in that I'm afraid I'm going to be harmed or anything. It's just, I don't want to live in a ghost town. I really don't.

DAVID: Well, what about Vinita?

LAUREL: I like Tulsa. You know, and I love to drive. It is no problem. Door to door it's exactly 80 miles from my house to Afton Station. I love to drive. I have to say I'm getting a little tired of the same drive, day after day. But, you know, that's one of the things that makes you more aware of the little things. And I'll bet you I'm the foremost authority on Tulsa to Afton driving. I mean, every time I get in the car—and I always take old 66—I try to think of something new to look for on that trip. And so far it's worked pretty well all these years, but I'm running out of things to look for. I mean I even count road kill some days because I've gotta do something. (Laughs.)

DAVID: You said that you don't make money on your store.

LAUREL: Um-hmm. (Agreeing.)

DAVID: So, one might ask, you know, why, why do you do it? Why don't you sell it and move back to Tulsa, and etcetera.

LAUREL: I don't know. I just have no interest in doing that. Well, first of all if I sold it and moved back to Tulsa I'd be the most bored person in the world because I have to stay busy. But to tell the truth it never really occurred to me. My biggest fear is that something health-wise will happen to my ex-husband, or he'll want out of it for some reason and I'll have the whole thing. And then, what do I do? You know? With all those cars and the building and the whole thing! But no, I'm not going to be the one to drop out of this. I'm in for the count.

DAVID: And, why?

LAUREL: Oh please! You're too good. I don't know. Just because I love it. It's just, it's been my life's dream. Well, maybe not all my life, but a huge amount of my life, to have a little place on Route 66 and sit there and meet people. And tell them about Route 66 and tell them about road tripping in general. Is fun. You know, get your kids in the car and start 'em early, because then they'll end up like me: loving it forever. But really, I can't give you a better answer than that, I just love it.

DAVID: Michael referred you to me, because he thinks of you as kind of a new generation of Route 66 revivalists. And I'm actually very interested in the motivation of people who want to hold onto this part of the past. So I'm trying to understand, and the reason I'm asking you is a lot of people would say, "Well you know you could come down here to Tulsa and get yourself a little place and sell Route 66 materials. But it's not the same, is it?"

LAUREL: I wrote an essay on my, not my blog, but on my website, about this very thing. As a child, when other kids were wanting to be doctors, lawyers and whatever, all I wanted to do was own a little motel in a little town somewhere. I was even too young at this point to know Route 66 from anything else, you know. And that persisted. My dad

had a big drawing board, because he was a designer, and he made me a little drawing board, and I'd sit there next to him and design motels. And then I'd have grand openings of my little motels, and I'd make out little sheets of paper for people who were checking and I'd design the signs, the whole thing. And that persisted forever and ever, up until I grew up and realized what a pain in the ass job owning a motel is. (Laughs.) You know, I figured that out. So at that point, I wanted to do something, but motel ownership was not really what I wanted to do anymore, and neither did David, my husband. He would have none of that. But you know I kinda got around that by saying "Well, we could have a little visitor center/museum and you could show your cars." And that's what did it for him. But no, when I say "life-long interest," I am not kidding. It's pretty much life-long interest in doing it, and now I'm doing it, and I'm very flattered that he called me a new generation . . . I mean I'm old . . . but it's nice to be called a new generation of Route 66 enthusiasts because I guess that would be true. Although I've been an enthusiast *about* Route 66, I haven't been an enthusiast *on* Route 66 . . .

DAVID: Well, I once interviewed Angel Delgadillo . . .

LAUREL: Oh, yes.

DAVID: You probably know Angel.

LAUREL: Oh yes.

DAVID: And, you know, he started out being a barber and pretty soon there was more interest in his knowledge on Route 66 than there was in his barbering, and I don't think he does any barbering today.

LAUREL: A little. He will.

DAVID: He still has the shop.

LAUREL: Yeah, he'll do it if you talk him into it, I guess.

DAVID: But I'll bet he earns ten times as much from selling things at his store as he does in his other occupation.

LAUREL: Yeah.

DAVID: Who do you see that's like you that might be considered part of this since-the-turn-of-the-century group of revivalists?

LAUREL: I would point you toward Frank and Trudy Jugler, who have a little mom and pop hotel in Chelsea, Oklahoma. They opened about the same time I opened my place. But they're very much into Route 66—little six room motel, which is a wonderful

motel if you're familiar with it at all. . . sort of my dream . . . he's really new at the game too . . .

Now let me think . . . have you talked to the ladies on "Four Women on the Route" in Kansas? Well, that's a trip. (Laughs.) Four women from Galena, Kansas, bought a little gas station, and two of them I think dropped out now, but two of them are left, and they're trying to keep it together. They have hamburgers there and steak sandwiches, and one of their brothers does the cooking, and they have a few souvenirs. But their main draw is, they have Mater from the *Cars* movie. The original truck that was used as the drawings for the cartoon. So people go there and take their picture in front of Mater. And they have been in business probably less time than I have, but they do well. Since they have that food, they get more groups than I get, because the groups like to stop and have a sandwich, and I don't want to get into that.

DAVID: So would you call what you do having a hobby?

LAUREL: Yeah, yeah. I have to say that because I like to think of myself as having this great business, but let's face it, it's a hobby. An expensive hobby, I might add. (Laughs)

DAVID: Well you don't have to pay any rent, so that's . . .

LAUREL: No, I don't have to. I mean we bought it outright, so I don't have to . . . that's good. But the utilities are horrendous, and my gas bill coming back and forth from there, it's ridiculous. Oh I know one thing I should tell you! A fellow from town asked us if he could put his shaved ice, I don't know what you call it, a little kiosk sort of thing, on our property. And we immediately said "Yeah, for sure," because that'll keep people . . . you know, people will stop there and we might be able to exchange customers. And it's all ready to go. We have paid to have his electricity hooked up and we're letting him use our water. And he should be ready to go soon. So we're hoping that'll be helpful because he's going to have shaved ice plus hot dogs and nachos. And you know, there will actually be a place to eat--something--in Afton, which we never had before. Of course I had to insist that he put a Route 66 shield on his little building (which he hasn't done yet, but he says he's got one), because I said no one is going to stop there if you don't have a Route 66 shield on it. Especially the foreign tourists. Because they don't stop anywhere unless there's a Route 66 shield. And I don't think he believed it. I don't think it even occurred to him that he was on Route 66 until I started telling him that's where all my people are coming from. Because the reason he asked to put it on our property was because he said "I always see a lot of people stopping there, and they don't stop anywhere else in town." And I felt like saying, "Well, think about it a little bit." (Laughs.) This is Route 66, and they're stopping for that. But I think he gets it now, so . . .

DAVID: Are there many other people like you in Oklahoma?

LAUREL: Like me in what way?

DAVID: Individual small-time entrepreneurs.

LAUREL: Let me go down the road and see what I can think of. A lot, I think.

DAVID: And do you see those numbers increasing, or decreasing?

LAUREL: Probably increasing at this point.

DAVID: Now why is that?

LAUREL: Well, I think we're having a great surge of interest in Route 66. The economy might have an effect this summer, I don't know. But there's a much bigger interest now than even ten years ago when I came here. And so people are wanting to take advantage of that. We've got little things like up in Commerce, Oklahoma, there was a little ice cream stand and just kind of sat there and they didn't really cater to Route 66 people really. Until the son invented Route 66 cookies. And he made a Route 66 cookie out of a shield, and got it patented, he says. I don't know if that's possible. But, and now he's the Route 66 cookie guy. So people stop there. You know, you have to have a little catch. And that's fairly new.

DAVID: The people that you know that you're describing, like the cookie man, are they making it?

LAUREL: I seriously doubt it, but we don't discuss that. I frequently discuss the fact that I'm making no money because I don't care. At this point it really financially does not matter to us, but a lot of the people I'm sure are struggling and not happy about it.

DAVID: So are the number of tourists increasing?

LAUREL: Yes. They are at my place, anyway.

DAVID: Since when?

LAUREL: I started keeping records only about four or five years ago. And I've gone up about 1000 per summer for each year. Last summer I had about 6000, the year before, 5000, 4000, 3000, you know . . .

DAVID: Is that because more people know you because you're in the guidebook, or is it because there are more people on the road?

LAUREL: I think it is both. Definitely the publicity, the guidebook and stuff, but I really think there are a lot more people on the road. There are a lot of big tour companies now that are getting into this particularly Australia. Netherlands tour companies.

DAVID: So people would fly into Tulsa or something and go north?

LAUREL: No, well generally they fly into Chicago and go west. All of them rent some vehicles here, very very few bring their own vehicles over. But companies now are set up to, for instance, rent motorcycles, so this happens many many times each year. A guy named Dale Butell from Australia brings over like forty people, and it's either a motorcycle group, or Mustangs (Australians love Mustangs), and he arranges for all these things to happen when they get here. And then they go across Route 66 and then they deposit the vehicles there and fly home from there. And then another group flies in, gets the vehicles back, and they go back and forth and back and forth.

DAVID: Wild!

LAUREL: It is wild. I had one group from New Zealand that brought their own motorcycles. They got a big container and put it on a ship with forty or fifty motorcycles on it. I thought that was kind of interesting, very few of them do that.

DAVID: What do the tourists want to know about Route 66?

LAUREL: Very few of them get in depth with questions like that. Mostly they'll say they want to know what the next thing is to see down the road. Occasionally some will really want to talk, and I'll tell them to pull up a chair, and . . . then they want to know a little of the history of the area, and all that sort of thing. So much is available in guidebooks now, that I think they don't really feel a need to talk. They want to meet the people, more than anything else. And they always, I ask every one of them what their favorite part of Route 66, and they always say "the people." It puts a big burden on me and others, you know because we gotta be ambassadors pretty much, and we have to be really knowledgeable, fun, and fill whatever needs they have. (Laugh.)

DAVID: Are there too many of these little stores on Route 66? I mean supposing somebody . . . the last time I was in Vinita I didn't see any curio shops in Vinita. Miami has a couple I guess. But could there be too many?

LAUREL: Oh I imagine there could be. I doubt whether that will happen. Well, let's think. If you come into Oklahoma over the border, first place you've got is this little cookie guy, but a lot of people skip that altogether because he doesn't get much publicity. And then in Miami there's the Coleman Theater, and they have wonderful tour there. And now there's a little motorcycle museum there. And if they want food, Waylon's Cookoo Burger if they're into burgers, and the next thing is me. And then after that, Vinita, nothing really there that people are interested in. Claremore has the two bigger museums,



the gun museum and the Will Rogers, no little things. And then, The Blue Whale in Catoosa that everybody has to stop and see. And then Tulsa.

DAVID: Now what do you most often sell?

LAUREL: Guidebooks. Guidebooks and little things that they can carry if they're you know, taking it on the plane or someplace. I make magnets, and I make 'em almost daily. I sell a lot of those. And I have one of those magnet-maker machines and I just design 'em myself and make 'em. And little stickers and things like that. Little pins for their hats. None of which makes me much money at all. The guidebooks I do pretty well on. And then I have a lady who now is doing a lot of really nice handmade stuff, and I'm selling that for her. And some beautiful Route 66 handbags, and neat little things that people like. But I don't sell much of that. She's very high priced. But I needed something to fill in and she's local and good at what she does.

DAVID: If you had it to do all over again, what would you do differently?

LAUREL: The only thing I might do different would be to find a place in a town that was more supportive. I get very jealous of towns like Pontiac, Illinois, or Cuba, Missouri, these towns that are just *into* Route 66. And they have murals, and they have festivals, and they have all these things. And I thought when I moved to Afton, when I moved the business to Afton, that maybe I could be in the forefront of that, but there are no people there. And the people that are there aren't interested. And they're all older, and I mean the young crowd's dying out in that town. It's just never going to be supportive. And I . . . I understand that. But *gosh* I'm jealous when I see these other little towns just sort of bloom into Route 66 destinations. That's the thing that I might change.

DAVID: By having gone to a different spot. How interesting.

LAUREL: Um hmm. But I'm way too lazy to move now.

DAVID: Do you ever get kinda lonely there?

LAUREL: Yes. In the winter, I try to keep it open in the winter, and oh my goodness! Well, forget it. I go up there and I'm there for two hours and I think "I gotta get outa here." Because if I don't have people to talk to, and I've done everything, I've dusted everything 25 times and, you know, restocked the shelves and like . . . so this winter I was only open two or three days a week. And next winter I might only be open on weekends.

DAVID: That's when much of your travelers come?

LAUREL: More. That would be the only thing I'd change. Otherwise I'd also not be divorced. (Laughs.) Because we worked well as a team and now I kind of don't like to

ask him to do some things I would ask him otherwise, because I know he's got another family to worry about and all that. And it would have been much more fun if we had done this a hundred percent together.

DAVID: Well, is there anything you would like to add to what we've been saying about the life of a Route 66 troubadour, in a small town?

LAUREL: Just hang in there. (Laughs.) And, um, well, I don't know. I think that getting the town enthusiastic, which I've said fifteen times already but I'll say it again, is the most important thing. If at all possible. Maybe it takes rocking the boat, I don't know what it takes, but in Afton I've already done all the boat rocking and all that, and it's not gonna happen. (Laughs.) Little things, like I said before. Plaster your building if possible with Route 66 shields and Route 66 everywhere because that draws people in, very much. Uh . . . you know what happens in Afton, and I talked to the mayor about this on the day that I met him. We need a way to slow down the traffic, because the way Afton works, it's just a straight shot through town, and people don't slow down and don't look from side to side. And it's just frustrating. There are a lot of semis go through here because they're avoiding the turnpike tolls, and they might have a big ol' semi behind them, and they, all they want to do is get through town. I asked the mayor if there might be a chance for a stop sign at our main intersection, and he said "No." Something like that. "No." (Laughs.) "No. Tried that once, twenty-five years years ago. Didn't do it." (Laughs.) So you know, finding a way to get people to slow down, finding ways to advertise yourself. Publicity. Because you're not going to get it in town. You've got to get it through publications and TV/radio, billboards if necessary. Word of mouth of course is always great, and that helps us a lot on Route 66.

DAVID: I thought I might close with a question that I often ask as I try and understand why Route 66 means so much to people. What's so special about Route 66?

LAUREL: Nothing. (Laughs.) Nothing.

DAVID: But yet . . .

LAUREL: Something within us, I guess. I've been asked that question before, and I cannot answer that. If I had decided years and years ago that I was interested in the Lincoln Highway, then that would be special to me. But I collected more post cards of Route 66 than I did of the Lincoln Highway years ago, so it became my . . .

This is kind of interesting. We used to have a sailboat. And we were living up in New England, and we were on a sailing trip to Maine, and we pulled in somewhere in Maine, and I went to shore, and there was a little antique shop. And I walked up to the antique shop and I asked him if he had any postcards. And he said, well he didn't have any there, but he had some in a barn about five miles outside of town. And I said "Well, I don't have a car. We don't have a car here because we're on our sailboat." He said, "Well

jump in the bed of the pickup truck.” So my husband and I jumped in the bed of his pickup truck and drove out to the country to this barn. And in the barn were boxes, almost to the ceiling, of postcards. And some of them had water damage, but I picked out all that I wanted. Enough to fill a sailboat. I mean my husband was fit to be tied. Took ‘em back, paid \$50 for the whole lot of thousands and thousands and thousands of ‘em. They all turned out to be response cards. Do you remember the show, I think it’s still on TV, the one where they bid on groceries and things [The Price is Right], and these were all response cards of this game show. How they got in this barn in the middle of Maine I have no idea. But anyway, I took them back to the boat, and on that whole trip I was sifting through them and putting them in piles. And the pile of Route 66 postcards was huge. And I think it was that trip that I decided “This is gonna be my thing. I’m gonna concentrate on Route 66.” And that’s what I did.

DAVID:       What would rock the boat? What would motivate a community that is small, without a lot of resources, to get behind Route 66 and take the kind of steps that a Cuba or a Pontiac has?

LAUREL:      Well, we need more people for one thing. Those are slightly larger towns. Um, I don’t know. I’m hoping that these two ladies from the University that are doing this thing will come up with some ideas, because I’m tapped out as far as ideas are concerned.

At one time a bunch of us got together, not townspeople but my friends, my Route 66 friends, and talked about having a festival, or something like that. And we still might do that. I have bought, well I bought 90% of the stone monument that’s, you know, only a mile down the road from my place. It’s the old nine-foot highway, the original section of Route 66 that’s never been marked. And so they were talking about getting a monument. So I threw in the money, and my ex-husband volunteered to, when it was made out in western Oklahoma, pick it up, bring it back and plant it. It’s a good size granite monument, showing that it’s the original section and all that. And we were thinking, and the town of Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau said “Well maybe we could have something to, you know, around the installation of this monument.” And I said “That’s a great idea, let’s have it at my place, because I need people to come to my place.” Well, it’s been a year-and-a-half, and the Oklahoma Department of Transportation hasn’t okayed the spot that we want to put it. They have, but they haven’t sent us the paperwork yet. So, um . . . we’re thinking about having something at my place. Now I don’t know how many people we’ll get. I can tell you for sure that if I put out all the publicity in the world, I will get maybe two people from Afton, if any at all. But maybe people from the surrounding towns will come, and Route 66 people will come, and maybe bring a little interest, you know, with maybe a car show or something. But we’re hoping it happens this summer, but you know it’s all wrapped up in red tape.

DAVID:       Well, thank you very much for speaking with me.

LAUREL: Oh, you're welcome.

DAVID: Do I have your permission to use this interview in my own writing and broadcasting?

LAUREL: No. (Laughs.) Yes, of course. (Laughs.)

DAVID: And to deposit it with the National Park Service?

LAUREL: Sure.

DAVID: And we can make it public to people who are interested in learning more about you and about your work in Afton.

LAUREL: I hope I haven't insulted anybody too much.

DAVID: I don't think so, but is that "Yes"?

LAUREL: Yes, that's a yes.

DAVID: Great. Thank you very much.

LAUREL: Well, you're quite welcome.